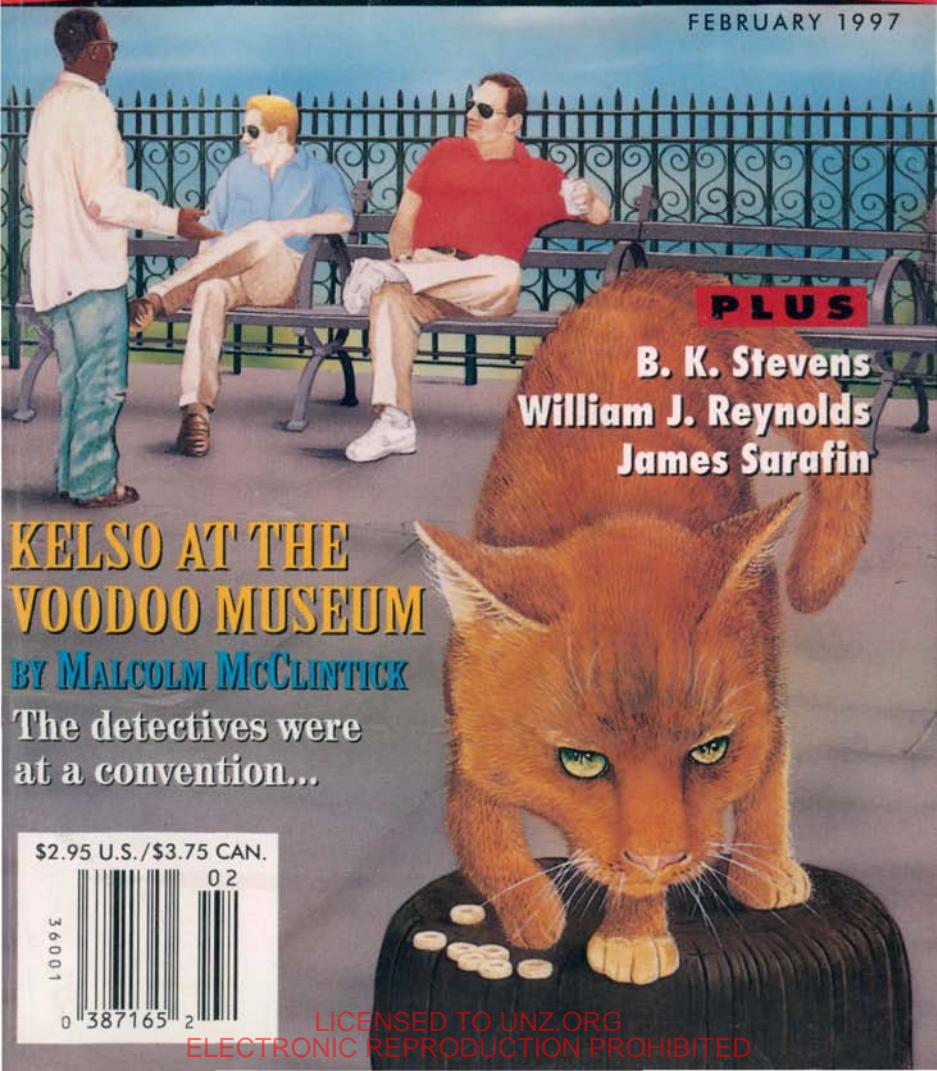


# ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 1997



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## KELSO AT THE VOODOO MUSEUM

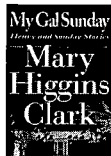
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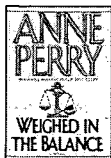
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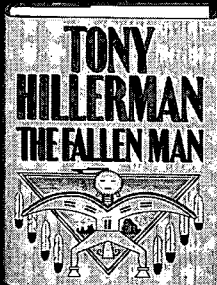


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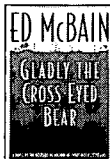
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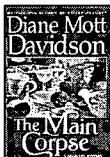
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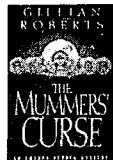
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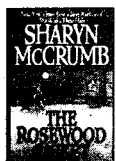
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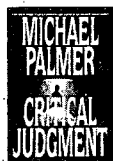
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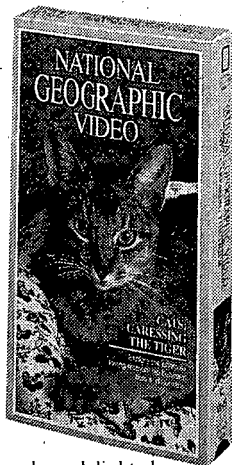


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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e are just back from our Columbus Day weekend junket to St. Paul to attend Bouchercon 27, the annual convention for mystery fans, authors, editors, agents, booksellers, and divers other folk. The Twin Cities in October are filled with the brilliant reds and golds of autumn, and on this particular weekend were blessed with balmy seventy-degree weather, with the Mississippi River bright blue and sparkling.

We attended a cocktail party given by Penguin, where we had a chance to visit with Jeffery Deaver and Bill Pomidor and to meet Wendy Hornsby; the Friday night Anthony Awards banquet (Guest of Honor: Mary Higgins Clark; Toastmaster: Jeremiah Healy), where we feasted

on steak and pecan pie and chatted with S. J. Rozan and Brendan DuBois; and generally went round and about, catching up on Loren D. Estleman, John Lutz, Frank Denton (a story of his will be coming up soon here), and others. We had wonderful German food on Saturday night with AHMM's book reviewer Mary Cannon, and put in time at a panel discussion on poisons, where we found out just how hard they are to detect in an autopsy unless the medical examiner has reason to suspect both foul play and the particular toxin involved. We also found out that people do die, badly, of vitamin D overdoses. We rooted for D. H. Reddall, who was nominated for a Shamus (the Private Eye Writers of America's award)

*(continued on page 153)*

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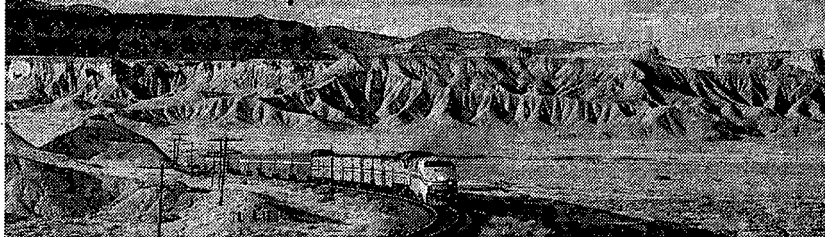
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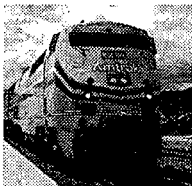
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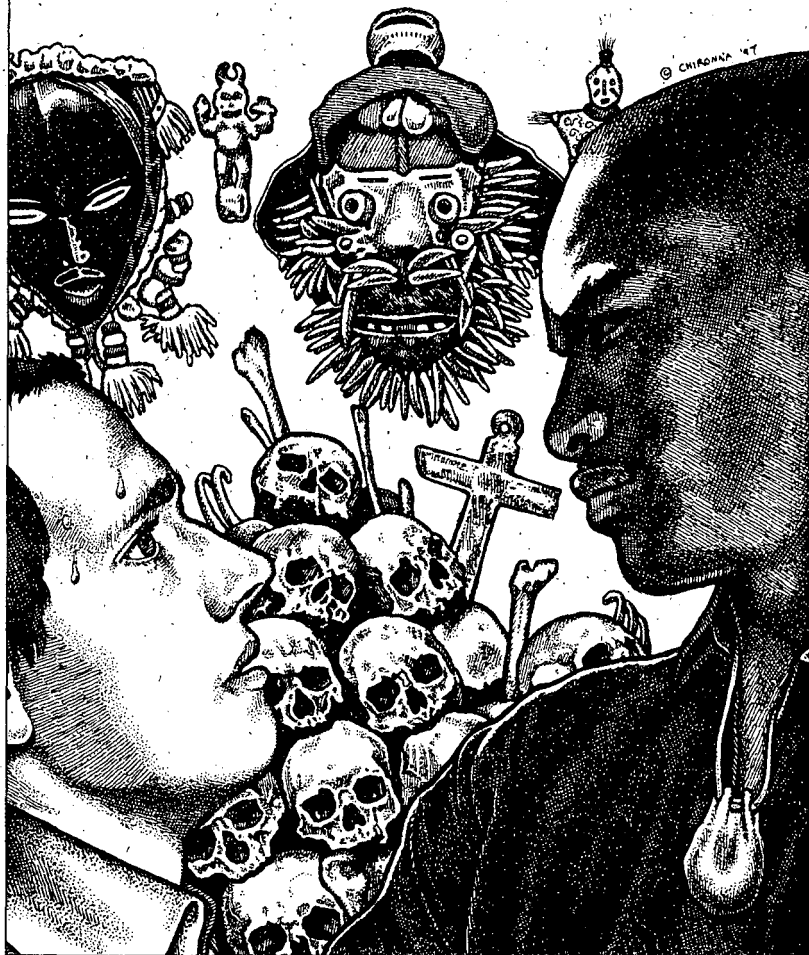
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# Kelso at the Voodoo Museum

Malcolm McClintick







**T**wo men sat at a table at one end of a small restaurant called the Cafe Beignet, at Chartres and St. Ann on one corner of Jackson Square. The cafe was open to the air on two sides; although it was only nine thirty in the morning, the heat was already oppressive, and the two men sweated in their shortsleeved shirts and trousers.

A short distance up St. Ann Street one of the steamboats was docked on the New Orleans side of the Mississippi, and they could hear its calliope playing "Are You from Dixie?" over and over again. Endlessly.

At the other end of the cafe a man in dark glasses sat alone and from time to time peered over the top of a *Times-Picayune*.

"I think that guy's watching us," one of the men said. His name was George Kelso, and he was just slightly plump, especially around the middle, with brown hair receding more and more over a high forehead, rather solemn brown eyes, a large nose, about forty. He was a police detective from Clairmont City, Indiana, but during this hot week in May he was effectively on vacation, having been sent with his partner to a five day police detectives' convention here in New Orleans. He didn't look especially like a cop, but

that was true even when he was on duty. This morning he wore a wrinkled cotton shortsleeved shirt, khakis, and a pair of running shoes that had been white but now looked gray.

He felt a little naked without his gun.

"What guy?" His partner, Karl Smith, was taller, thinner, a couple of years younger, very pale and blond, with a narrow face and cold blue eyes that were hidden now behind the extremely dark lenses of a pair of aviator-style sunglasses. He was a little more sharply dressed, not in his usual snappy suit and tie but, in a concession to the New Orleans heat and humidity, in a blue shortsleeved Oxford dress shirt with the collar open, tan poplin trousers, and well-polished loafers.

"That little guy sitting in the far corner over there. Keeps ducking behind his newspaper." Kelso was facing the guy; Smith had to turn his head to see.

A skinny, smiling waiter in a white shirt, very Caribbean-looking, brought two orders of beignets and cafe au lait and set them on the small, rickety table. "Eighty-eight cents for three beignets, eighty-eight cents for coffee, one seventy-six each, please."

"I'll get it." Smith fished in his wallet. As he handed the waiter four bucks, he said, "Keep the

change. You see that little guy behind the paper over there?"

"Thank you, sir." The waiter glanced around. Nodded. "I see him."

"Have any idea who he is? A regular customer, maybe?"

"No idea." The waiter shrugged, looking a little embarrassed, anxious to get away. "I'm sorry. I don't know."

"He doesn't come here a lot?" Kelso asked.

"Sorry. No. I don't know. I don't see him before."

"Thanks," Smith said, and the waiter hurried away.

"That newspaper is the local *Times-Picayune*," Kelso said, sipping his *café au lait*, which he drank light with lots of steamed milk. Grimacing, he began stirring in sugar. "But it's two days old."

"Your eyes that good? You can make out the date from here?"

Kelso shook his head, picking up one of the powdered sugar-covered beignets. "I recognize the picture on the front page. I saw it two days ago when we checked into the hotel." He took a bite of the beignet. The powdered sugar got all over his fingers and mouth. It was delicious. "I could eat these all day and all night."

"I know. Two days ago. Huh. So he's got a two-day-old newspaper. That doesn't mean he's watching you."

"He's hiding behind it," Kelso said, his mouth full of the delicious hot sourdough pastry. "He's watching us. I'm telling you."

Smith sipped his *café au lait*. "They claim there's chicory in this stuff. I sure can't taste it. Can you?"

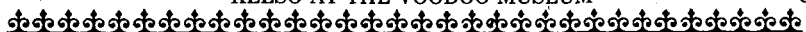
"I don't know what chicory tastes like."

Near a doorway leading back to the kitchen area, a radio-cassette player on a wooden shelf played pop music punctuated by news and weather. As Kelso and Smith ate and were watched, maybe, by the little guy behind the newspaper, a large black man went over to the radio, turned it off, and popped a cassette into the player, and background jazz started up. The black man took a saxophone from a battered case, licked the reed several times, blew a few notes, then started playing along with the tape.

"That guy's really good," Smith observed. He was something of a jazz enthusiast.

Kelso tapped a toe of his running shoe and finished his beignets, sweating. It seemed hotter by the minute. A few tourists were coming into the café now, many of them already burned bright red by the sun, probably fooled by the fact that it was only May.

They finished and left, and



Kelso put his sunglasses on as they walked up a steep, narrow sidewalk towards the river. It was still early morning with not a lot of people about yet. The sun glared off the water of the Mississippi, which really was an incredible mud-brown and not nearly as wide as Kelso had always imagined. Tugboats moved barges up- and downriver continuously. One of the paddle-wheeled steamboats had already left its moorings for a morning cruise; its calliope music drifted across the water to them, and they could see tourists standing at the railing.

When Kelso glanced over his shoulder, the small man from the cafe was following them, only a few yards back.

"He's coming," Kelso said.

Smith looked back and nodded. "Coincidence."

"Let's sit on a bench and watch the river."

They sat down on a gray wooden bench near yet another sax player, a thin black man with gray hair who played in the same key all the time and played the same song all the time. At least it sounded that way to Kelso. Smith would know.

"Is that the same thing over and over?"

Smith grimaced. "And in the same key."

Very white or very sunburned

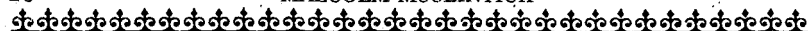
tourists passed by occasionally, and one or two of them dropped a coin or a dollar bill into a metal cup on the sidewalk in front of the sax man, causing him to stop playing long enough to grin and thank each person profusely.

A stray cat, yellowish and about the same size as Kelso's cat, appeared on the sidewalk, jumped up to a fence running behind the benches, and began eating a handful of Cheerios someone had left on top of a wooden piling.

The little man from the Cafe Beignet came over to the bench and stood looking at Kelso and Smith.

He was very short, probably only about five six at most, thin to the point of emaciation, with small features. He was dark-skinned but looked Haitian or Jamaican, or from one of the other Caribbean islands, not African. He wore dark glasses with brown frames, a long-sleeved shirt that looked about a hundred years old, baggy tattered pants in a kind of grayish-green color, and brown leather sandals all scuffed and battered. Maybe he was homeless and spent his days begging money from tourists, and Smith and Kelso looked like tourists.

"You are from the detective convention," the little man said. It was more of a statement than



a question. He had some kind of an accent, Creole maybe, but Kelso had heard numerous accents in this city and had no idea what most of them were.

He nodded, trying not to form theories but guessing that the guy was in fact a beggar who'd bothered to figure out which conventions were at what hotels as a way of ingratiating himself to his targets.

"Yes," he agreed. "We're from the detective convention."

"The detective convention at the Marriott." His voice was thin and high.

"What's it to you?" Smith asked, not angrily but not amiably either.

Behind them the stray cat finished its Cheerios and walked adeptly over the fence to the next piling, directly behind Kelso, found more Cheerios, and began to eat again.

"I need help," the man said in his high, strange voice. "Please. I need help."

"What's your name?"

"Don't talk to him, Kelso," Smith said. "Just give him a buck and let him go."

"Just a minute," Kelso said. He looked at the guy. "What's your name?"

"They call me Little Billy. I am being killed. You are police detectives. Please, I need help."

Kelso stared. "What do you mean, you're being killed?"

"Killed. Murdered. Somebody is murdering me. I go to the police. City police. They laugh at me, send me away. I have, uh, I don't have much time. You know? I am dying soon."

Smith muttered something and asked, "Be specific, okay? Who's trying to kill you and why?"

"Some man put a gris-gris on me." Kelso frowned; it sounded like "gree-gree." "You know," Little Billy said, "a hex."

"A hex?"

"Voodoo," Little Billy told them. "Each day I am weaker. Today, tonight, I will die. My heart, it pounds so hard. My eyes fail. I am hot. Tonight, probably, I will die."

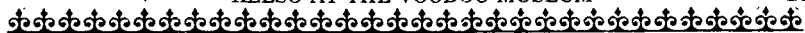
"Sounds like you've been hitting the sauce a little hard," Smith said. "You like rum? Whisky?"

"Please. He is killing me. You must believe. The gris-gris."

"Who's doing this to you?" Kelso asked. He'd heard, vaguely, of sympathetic magic, read the tiniest bit about voodoo once, out of sheer curiosity. All he remembered was that if an intended victim could be convinced he'd been hexed, he might actually get sick. Power of suggestion. Maybe this little guy believed it enough. "Do you know who it is?"

The little dark man removed his sunglasses and wiped glis-





tening sweat from his forehead. For a brief moment he looked at Kelso, and Kelso saw his eyes. Their pupils were extremely dilated, considering the glare out here along the river under a blindingly clear sky. Then he put his sunglasses back on. Drugs, Kelso thought. He's on something.

"I know who is hexing me. My girlfriend was married once. It is her former husband. You know? He plays music and works in the kitchen at a restaurant near here."

"What's his name? What restaurant?"

"Forget it, Kelso," Smith said.

"Le Vieux Pêcheur," Little Billy said. "It means the old fisherman. I don't know his name. They call him Crabman because he loves the soft-shell crabs."

A huge freighter was making its way towards the Gulf of Mexico one hundred miles downriver, its black hull orange with rust along the waterline, its cabins and superstructure glistening almost painfully white in the glare of the morning sun; black smoke streamed from its stack, and a huge wake spread out behind it in the muddy water, sending waves lapping at the shore.

"Crabman," Kelso repeated softly.

"Can you help me? Keep me from dying?"

"I don't know," Kelso said.

"We'll find this Crabman guy. Talk to him. See what we can do." He heard Smith's heavy sigh.

"Soon, please," the little man said. "Or I will be dead." Abruptly he turned and hurried away along the sidewalk.

Kelso turned and watched the yellow stray cat finish its Cheerios. "Are you tame?" he asked it and patted its head. The cat meowed in a surprisingly high voice, arched its back, and rubbed its head affectionately against Kelso's hand. "You are tame, huh? Who comes around here and leaves Cheerios for you?"

"Let's get out of here, Kelso. I'm turning into a broiled had-dock in this sun. Even with sun-block."

"You want to check out the little guy's story with me this afternoon?"

"You're nuts. That guy's probably hallucinating from drugs or booze or the heat."

"Maybe." Kelso felt sorry for the little guy. "It wouldn't hurt to ask the local cops, would it?"

They left the cat and the sax man; his music followed them, fading gradually, the same song in the same key.

**T**hey followed Decatur Street all the way back to Canal Street, and by the time they walked through the entrance to the

Marriott they were drenched with sweat. The air-conditioned lobby felt wonderful. They rode an elevator up to their room. There was a talk at eleven A.M. on "DNA Fingerprinting—Current Uses and Abuses," and neither of them really wanted to attend, but Lieutenant Leill had sent them down here to work, not play, so they felt obligated to spend at least part of their time in the meetings and conferences.

Kelso came out of the shower feeling refreshed and hungry. "Let's hit the DNA thing, then have lunch at the Vieux Pêcheur, okay? I wouldn't mind having some fresh crab."

"I hate crab. But I like that blackened redfish stuff. I didn't think I would, but I do."

"I thought you were a vegetarian?"

Smith grimaced. "Fish is okay."

A New Orleans police detective named Lewis was at the DNA lecture, and when it let out at noon, Kelso said hello.

"You ever hear of a guy called Little Billy?"

Lewis, a grayhaired man with a round pink face, metal-rimmed glasses, and a gray suit and tie, smiled knowingly. "Don't tell me you ran into him? He lives at the police department. He's always being arrested or just coming in to say hi. Usually with some fantastic sto-

ry to tell. He's been hexed by a voodoo priestess. A snake spirit is under his bed. Voices in the night. He was in a mental institution once, state hospital, diagnosis of schizophrenia."

"What's he been arrested for?"

Lewis shrugged. "You name it. Mostly minor stuff. Loitering. Drunk and disorderly. Not paying his bar tab. Petty theft. His rap sheet's as long as the mighty Mississippi. Some of it's more serious, though. A couple of busts for fraud. Receiving and selling stolen property. Why? How'd you run into him?"

"He was having breakfast at the Cafe Beignet," Kelso said. "We got into a conversation with him. That's all. I was just curious."

"He's harmless," Lewis said. "But I'd stay away from him. He's always got some sympathy story. He'll try to hit you up for cash. Funny. He was in here just the other day, at headquarters, something about a gris-gris. That's a voodoo spell or a charm. He thinks somebody's out to do him in."

"Have you ever heard of the Crabman?"

"Crabman? Sure. Plays great jazz guitar. Part-owner of a fish restaurant in the French Quarter. Le Vieux Pêcheur. You might try it if you like fresh fish. Be careful, though. Some of the dishes are really hot."

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Lewis chuckled. "Crabman's clean. No record. But colorful. You know, considers himself a voodoo character, hangs out occasionally at our own little Voodoo Museum, claims to have mystical powers. Lot of tourist hooley, if you ask me. It sells fish, though. Well, I promised my wife I'd be home for lunch. See you around."

"See you," Kelso said.

Mystical powers. He thought about the short thin guy known as Little Billy. He'd seemed really afraid. Possibly really sick. Dilated pupils. Pounding heart. Hot. Weak. Voodoo.

Maybe after lunch he'd go see what was what at this Voodoo Museum.

They sat at a square table neatly covered with an immaculate white cloth and ordered from a plastic-covered menu, trying not to notice the prices. The department was paying a per diem for meals and this would exceed it, but Kelso thought what the hell, we'll splurge a little, and Smith seemed not to mind. He ordered stuffed crabcakes, and Smith changed his mind and got grilled salmon. It was quiet and neat, open to the outside air, cooled by huge slowly-turning overhead fans. Incredibly, country music was playing softly in the background.

"What happened to the famous Dixieland jazz?" Smith asked their waiter, a young man who looked Vietnamese but spoke English with almost no accent.

The waiter smiled. "We play it mostly at night. In the daytime we get a lot of people who want country. It is the same all over town. Lots of people from Midwest and West come here. Where are you gentlemen from?"

"Indiana," Kelso said.

"Indiana. I have heard of it." He went away.

When he came back with their food, Kelso asked, "Is the Crabman around?"

"No. Not till tonight. He will come and play jazz at dinner, after seven. You have heard of him already?"

Smith said, "Sure. He's a local celebrity."

"Of course."

"Do you ever have a customer in here called Little Billy?" Kelso asked. "Small and thin? Not dressed very well?"

The waiter nodded. His smile was vague. "Of course. Little Billy. He comes here all the time. Eats supper here. Loves the Cajun dishes, the hotter the better. The stuffed crabcakes are his favorite, he eats them all the time. But he is not just a customer."

"Excuse me?"



"He eats, then works in the kitchen. He washes the dishes."

"How many nights a week?"

"Most nights. He needs the money, he says." The young waiter glanced left and right, then added softly, "He also comes because he likes a girl." He smiled knowingly in the direction of a short, slender, very young waitress with light brown skin.

As he turned to go, Kelso took a bite of crabcake. Suddenly his eyes watered. His mouth was on fire. "Water," he said hoarsely.

Smith chuckled. "A little hot?"

"I'm on fire!" Kelso drank.

The young waiter hurried over with a pitcher of ice water and refilled Kelso's glass. "They put a hot sausage in the crabcakes. Boudin. And some other spices. It is too hot for you?"

Kelso shook his head, and the waiter went away.

After the meal, and a dessert of coffee and the best bread pudding with whisky sauce Kelso had ever had, they walked out into the afternoon heat, which was like an oven.

"Is your mouth okay, Kelso?"

"I just wasn't expecting it. It was really very good."

"Right." Smith smirked. "So, where to now?"

"I'm going to check out some place called the Voodoo Museum."

Smith sighed and raised his

white eyebrows over the rims of his dark glasses. "Can't you give it up, Kelso? We've got a nice air-conditioned hotel to go to, with nice boring lectures on giving court testimony in homicide trials and preserving the crime scene in open areas. It must be ninety degrees already."

"I just want to see it," Kelso said.

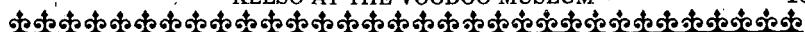
"Well, have fun. See you back at the hotel."

"Okay."

Smith walked away, and Kelso stood for a moment frowning at his Fodor's guide to New Orleans, squinting against the harsh glare of sunlight off the white pages, trying to read the street maps. He was on Bourbon Street and the next street towards the river was Royal, and somewhere between these two streets on Dumaine Street was the museum. He was about five blocks away now. With a sigh he closed the guidebook and started slowly along Bourbon Street.

Some of the buildings were right out of a picture postcard, the old traditional tan or blue or pink fronts with wrought-iron balconies; others were drab and dirty and could have existed in the inner part of any big city. Kelso passed private apartments, bars, a few nice-looking restaurants, trinket and T-shirt shops that were obvious tourist





traps. The sun was unrelenting. He sweated and walked more slowly. This is why people from the South walk slowly, he realized. The heat.

When he turned the corner onto Dumaine, he expected to see a huge sign, but there was nothing. He almost passed it. At the last moment he spotted a tiny single door with a diminutive sign, "VOODOO MUSEUM, OPEN 10 - 6." He pulled open the door and went in.

It was dark. That was the first thing that struck him. Dark and small. He removed his sunglasses. It appeared to be a minuscule office, and for a moment he thought he had the wrong place. It was hardly bigger than a nice-sized bathroom. A small desk faced the door, and behind it a thin white woman sat and talked on the phone. It sounded to Kelso like she was making appointments. On the desk a small sign announced consultations by appointment.

The woman behind the desk ignored him, and he glanced around, letting his eyes adapt. He became aware of a large, rather attractive black lady watching him with strangely pale eyes. When their eyes met, she asked in a low, thickly-accented voice, "Can I help you?"

"Uh, I'd like to see the museum."

"That will be five dollars, please." Kelso took out his wallet. "You are welcome to go alone. Or, if you prefer, you may catch up to the tour. It has already begun." She smiled at him.

"I'll go alone if that's all right."

"Certainly it is all right."

He handed her a five dollar bill, and she smiled again and pointed at a tiny doorway at the rear of the room. As he was about to go through the door, he looked back and said, "Excuse me but have you ever heard of someone called the Crabman?"

The black lady's pale eyes regarded him for a moment before she answered. "You are looking for him? You are a friend of his?"

"I'd like to meet him."

"He comes here each day. Not yet. But soon."

"I see. Well, thanks."

He went on through the door.

He was in an incredibly narrow corridor, surprisingly dark, surprisingly cramped, very short. Just to the left was a room through an open door, and a second room lay straight ahead. Several people stood in the second room listening to a guide; must be the tour, he thought, and entered the first room.

It also was surprisingly small: a square area crammed with items inside glass cases, items all over the walls. Hand-printed

signs explained the origin and meaning of voodoo, gris-gris, ju-ju. He saw a painting of a snake. Some old bones, skulls, dolls. Voodoo dolls? One doll had numerous rusted nails protruding from it. Magical and mystical symbols and carvings and potions were littered about everywhere. There were typewritten notes, but it was almost too dark to read them.

Kelso thought someone was watching him, but when he turned quickly, no one was there, so he peered at a hand-printed page that explained how African slaves had been taken to Haiti and introduced to Catholicism, and how voodoo was a mixture of African tribal religions and the Catholic religion. There were crosses, drawings of saints, other religious symbols. In the dimness it was difficult to see and read. Someone coughed and Kelso whirled, but again no one was there.

Must be the atmosphere, he thought, the voodoo stuff, all in my mind, power of suggestion . . .

He left this room, passing through the short, narrow corridor and into the other room. The tour group had departed. The coughing must have come from one of them as they were leaving. He was amazed to discover that this second room was the end of the tour—the famous

Voodoo Museum consisted of two rooms and a tiny hallway.

In this room Kelso saw more relics, photographs, drawings, gris-gris, potions, and the like. An altar was surrounded by symbols both African and Catholic. In a weird corner behind an iron grid railing, looking like an ancient graveyard, gray bones and broken skulls were piled in a heap; the empty eye sockets of the skulls stared at him. Above them hung a large painting of a young African girl dancing naked, holding over her head a large snake. Peering at the caption in the dimness, he read that she danced to attract the males, and the snake attracted the spirits of their dead ancestors.

Someone coughed behind him again, and when he looked around this time, someone was standing there.

The man was huge. Well over six feet, heavyset and muscular, in a black longsleeved shirt, black jeans, black shoes. He was dark, an African, with a wide face and eyes that seemed piercing even in the low light. He spoke in a deep bass that resonated in the small room.

"You look for Crabman?"

Kelso nodded. "Yes. Uh, are you . . . ?"

"Crabman. Why you look for me?"



"Can we talk someplace private?"

The dark eyes watched him intently. "Right here. Museum closed when I come in. Open again when I leave. I come every day at same time, one thirty. Nobody disturb us. Nobody come. Nobody."

The man's shirt was made of a silky material, open at the neck to expose his throat and upper chest. Kelso saw a small grayish pouch hanging there on a leather cord and figured it must be some sort of good luck charm.

"You like my gris-gris?" Crabman asked in his low voice. One thick finger went up to touch the pouch. "Gris is gray in French. Gris-gris is gray-gray, because spirit of voodoo is to bring together and blend opposites. Black and white make gray."

"I see."

"Opposites," Crabman said. "Black and white. Me and you. If we come together, we become gray. Not together, we stay black and white." He touched the pouch. "This gris-gris made of the skin of a bat I kill. Sacrificed. I drink his blood and now it is part of me. Inside this pouch are things, some I can name, some I cannot name. Powdered seeds and roots, herbs, spices, dried blood and bits of bone. Gris-gris. It is powerful. It protects me."

The dimness and the altar with its staring skulls and the

cramped hot confines and the huge man's deep voice combined to hypnotize Kelso; he felt almost as though he were in a dream, or in another dimension, and shook his head to break the spell.

"My name is Kelso," he said, and his own voice sounded strange, as though he were speaking too loudly in a church. "I'm a police detective." He took out his leather I.D. folder, opened it, and showed Crabman his gold detective's shield and police identification card. Crabman hardly glanced at them.

"Why you want me?"

Kelso put the folder away. "Do you know a man called Little Billy?"

Crabman slowly nodded. "I know him. Some."

"He asked me for help this morning. He says someone's put a hex on him and he's dying. He thinks it's you because he's been seeing your ex-wife." When the huge man only stared at him, Kelso asked, "Is that true? Any of it?"

He was conscious of the relics and photographs and charms covering the walls, of the altar with its bones and skulls, of the painting of the nude young African girl dancing, holding the snake over her head. The gris-gris around the man's neck. Bat's blood...

Crabman spoke again. His

voice was quieter but just as deep and resonant. "I put no spell on Little Billy. Maybe somebody did. Maybe I hear of it. The woman he with, she is no woman."

"I don't understand—" Kelso began.

"She was my wife. No more. Now she waits tables at Le Vieux Pêcheur. But she is no woman now. She is the snake."

Kelso blinked. "The snake?"

"Billy lied to her. Then he try to force her to be with him. Now she make him pay. Snake will have her vengeance."

Kelso's mind was working hard to decipher this. "Are you saying that Little Billy tried to force himself on this woman? Physically? Sexually?"

Crabman pointed, and Kelso followed the direction of his finger. He was indicating the painting of the dancing girl.

"Snake she hold, symbol of greatest voodoo spirit. Most powerful spirit. Woman Little Billy with is now priestess, embodied by the snake. That is what is killing him."

Kelso looked at the naked girl, at the snake she held over her head, then looked back up into the black, intense eyes of Crabman. "Whatever you want to call it, you realize, don't you, that murder is against the law?"

"Whose law? Voodoo has its own law. Its own justice."

"Listen—"

"You could be in great danger. If you try to interfere in this."

"What kind of danger?" He tried to summon some confidence, some feeling for the normal and the everyday. He was a cop, even if this wasn't his city. "Are you trying to threaten me?"

"No one threatens you. Only voodoo. Look at that woman and her snake and you will see what I mean. Look more closely."

Kelso involuntarily turned and glanced once more at the dancing girl. The eyes of the snake she held seemed to look back at him. But when he turned impatiently to reply, Crabman was gone. Kelso stood alone in the small back room of the museum.

He hurried through the short hall and into the tiny front office, but Crabman wasn't there.

"Excuse me, did anyone see ..." he began, then noticed the door to the street closing.

"Would you like to buy a gift, a souvenir?" the attractive black woman with the strangely pale eyes asked him pleasantly, but he hurried for the door.

Out on Dumaine Street Kelso put his sunglasses on quickly and looked both ways, but in the blinding sun and pulsing heat no huge black man was visible.





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Kelso wanted to go back to the civilized cold of the hotel, shower, put on fresh, dry clothes, and maybe relax in the coffee shop. But he was too far into this now. He had to keep going.

He walked the five blocks back to Le Vieux Pêcheur in the glaring, baking heat, sweating profusely, and entered the restaurant. It was a quarter till two, and only a few customers sat at small tables eating a late lunch. After a moment he spotted the short, slender waitress carrying a tray of food to two elderly ladies; she filled their water glasses, then turned away and disappeared into the kitchen again.

The Vietnamese-looking young man who'd waited on him before came over, smiling. "Hello, sir. Are you back for some more of the stuffed crabcakes?"

Kelso grinned. "No, thanks. But listen, the young woman who just waited on those two ladies. Isn't she the one you said Little Billy likes?"

"Yes. That is her."

"And she used to be married to the Crabman?"

The waiter's smile vanished, and he became cautious. "She works here. She is a waitress. I am very busy."

"Yes, but is she, uh, connected with the Crabman, maybe?"

The waiter seemed suddenly

nervous. "I cannot say, sir. Maybe the manager . . ."

"I don't need the manager." Kelso tried to sound casual. "Look, it's nothing. I met the Crabman a little while ago, at the Voodoo Museum. I was just curious to know if that waitress used to be his wife. That's all. Can't you tell me?"

"Yes. Yes, sir. She did. I must go. I am very busy."

"What time does she get off work . . ."

"Very busy, sir." The waiter fled.

Kelso sighed, left the restaurant, and crossed the narrow street. A tiny alley directly opposite provided a modicum of shade; Kelso entered the alley, leaned against the white-painted brick, found it too hot, and stood up straight, absolutely motionless, trying to catch a nonexistent breeze, and watched the entrance of Le Vieux Pêcheur.

He would wait for half an hour, then decide what to do next.

He waited, sweating, and watched the door.

For once, Kelso was in luck.

At two fifteen, just when he had decided to go watch the back door for a while, he saw the slender, light brown young woman emerge from the restaurant's entrance, wearing faded

jeans, a red T-shirt, and leather sandals, and hurry away along Bourbon Street.

Kelso followed.

The waitress led him here and there in the afternoon's blazing heat till his sports shirt was so wet it clung to his soaked undershirt and his feet burned in his socks and running shoes. Sweat kept trickling down his forehead and into his eyes, making him wipe his eyes repeatedly. She led him down narrow sidewalks becoming clogged now with tourists, under iron balconies, then into a light green stucco apartment house where the heat was even worse because there wasn't the slightest breath of air, up a dark creaking staircase to the second floor, ovenlike, and he saw a door close.

He stood for a moment, wiping his eyes and catching his breath, then knocked at the door.

It opened.

"Yes?"

"Kelso," he managed to say, trying not to pant. "Police." He showed her his badge and I.D.

She peered at the I.D. card, frowned. "Clairmont City?"

"I'm from out of town."

She was pretty, light skin almost the color of the *café au lait* he'd had at breakfast, brown eyes, a narrow face with high cheekbones. He thought she might be West Indian. Haitian maybe.

"And what do the Clairmont City police want with me?" She smiled a little, then added, "You want to come inside? You're letting out all my cold air."

"Thanks."

He stepped into her apartment. Except for the temperature it was like the Voodoo Museum—very dark, and the walls were covered with voodoo relics, gris-gris, pictures and paintings of animals and snakes and African masks, bones and skulls, even an altar. But it was cold in here, blessedly cold, from a window air conditioner running full blast.

"You were in the restaurant, weren't you?" she asked, watching him.

The cold air made his damp clothes feel like ice, and he shivered, then approached the altar. He stared. On it was a tiny replica of a roasting pit and a spit. In the pit a blue flame burned, presumably gas. On the spit was tied a small figure, a doll, a brownish clay replica of a man. The spit was connected to a miniature motor with a battery and slowly turned the tiny man over the flame.

Kelso looked at the young woman. Her brown eyes seemed faintly mocking.

"Is that supposed to be Little Billy?"

"It's man. Any man. All men

who violate the sanctity of a woman. Violate her spirit."

In the dimness she seemed unreal, like a shadow. He wished they could turn on a light.

"Are you saying Little Billy violated you? Assaulted you? Raped you?"

"We were together, but I wasn't willing. Is that your law's definition?"

"Yes. More or less."

"Then that is my law." She pointed a slender brown finger at the slowly rotating figure on the spit over the flame. "More or less."

Kelso felt frustrated and helpless. "You really believe this?"

"As much as you believe your law. No more. No less."

He kept looking at the replica of Little Billy rotating over the fire. He recalled the small thin man's eyes, pupils dilated from fear or from some drug, pleading for help, complaining of being hot and weak, complaining of his heart pounding. Hot, he thought. Burning. From being turned over a fire . . .

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

She tilted her head slightly to one side. "Billy was obsessed."

"Obsessed?"

"What would you call it? Crabman warns him. I warn him. Still he comes around all the time. To the restaurant. He

won't leave me alone. One night last week I go out with him. Talk to him. Explain to him. I'm not Crabman's any more, but I'm not Billy's, either. He . . . tries to force himself on me. Make me love him. And even then, still he comes around. Eats his crabcakes. Washes dishes. Watches me. Eyes me. I tell him he will burn."

She pointed again at the small figure tied over the spit, blackened and charred.

"So he has burned."

In spite of all that Kelso believed in, he met the young woman's brown-eyed gaze and asked, "If I asked you to take that thing off of there, what would you say?"

"I would say . . ." She went past him in the small dark room and stood looking down at the altar. She picked up a pencil, poked at the clay figure on the spit, then pressed a button, and the spit stopped turning. She turned a dial, and the flame shrank and went out. "It doesn't matter now. He's dead."

He stared at her. None of this is real, he told himself. None of this is possible.

Nevertheless, he said, "If I find Little Billy dead, I might have to come back here and arrest you for murder."

"I'm beyond your law," she told him. "And so is he."

Kelso opened the door and

went out into the suffocating heat of the apartment building hallway.

He made a note of the address, used his Fodor's to orient himself, and then walked all the way back to the Marriott. The first thing he did was go up to his room and strip off his clothes and shower. Then he lay for a while on his bed in clean, dry underwear and tried to think of nothing. After a while the door opened and Smith came in.

"Kelso. Where the hell've you been all afternoon?"

Kelso sat up, feeling stiff. He found a clean shirt and khakis and put them on while explaining to Smith what had happened. He knew exactly what Smith would do and say. He would sneer and make jokes, he would tell Kelso he was nuts, he would taunt him and make fun of him mercilessly.

But he didn't.

With one of the strangest expressions on his face that Kelso had ever seen, Smith said quietly, "You're not going to believe this, Kelso, and I don't believe it myself. But I just saw that New Orleans detective, Lewis, down in the gift shop, and he says they got a call about half an hour ago. Little Billy's dead. He called the 911 operator and said he needed an ambulance, said he was afraid he was dying.

When the medics got there . . ." Smith shrugged.

"What was the cause of death?" Kelso asked emphatically.

"I dunno. Lewis invited me to follow it up with them, both of us, since we were interested in him. I've got the address."

"Let's go."

They took a cab to a rundown area on Magazine Street, on the other side of Canal Street from the French Quarter, to a two story frame building with an ambulance and several New Orleans police cars parked in front and a little cluster of gawkers being kept to one side by uniformed cops. Inside the house, in another hot, shabby apartment without even an air conditioner, Little Billy lay on a bed in a drab bedroom that felt like a furnace. Lewis was there, and a fat balding doctor named Green who wheezed as he talked.

"I can't tell what killed him. He's flushed bright red. And his pupils are dilated. Could be a drug. Atropine or scopolamine, for instance. If he's been dead very long, they'd be dilated anyway, but I'll have to determine the time of death. Apparently he called 911 only an hour ago. His body temperature's way up, but it's too hot up here. We'll need an autopsy, obviously. But it's either a natural death or a

drug of some kind because there's no trauma, no injury or wound. No insect bites." He paused, wheezed, said, "My best guess right now is a drug, maybe a poison. Something he took, something he ate."

"He called 911, and the medics got here ten minutes later," Detective Lewis said to Smith. "He was in a coma. Pupils dilated. He was wearing sunglasses, even here in this dark room. Temperature high, he was really burning up. They looked around for pills or something he could've taken, couldn't find anything. He quit breathing suddenly. They tried to keep him going, but by the time the doctor got here, he was dead."

*He really was burning up*, Kelso thought, and saw the miniature man twisting on the spit over the fire on the altar in the young woman's darkened apartment. Then he forced himself back into the real world and thought of the pouch on a cord around Crabman's neck. He looked at Detective Lewis.

"Do you know where this Crabman lives?"

This time Smith was predictable. "Kelso, give it up."

"I think he might have murdered Little Billy," Kelso said.

"Are you serious?" Lewis asked.

"Perfectly serious."

"Come on, then," Lewis said.

Crabman lived across the river in a section called Algiers, and they took the direct route, avoiding the bridge, which meant riding the free ferry at the end of Canal Street. Reluctantly, Smith went along, too.

They sat in small chairs on a deck open to the river on three sides. When the diesel engines revved up, the vibration was so loud and hard that it rattled Kelso's teeth. It took only about five minutes to cross the broad expanse of dirty brown water. The end of the boat swung around and banged hard against the Algiers dock, and everyone got off.

Clouds had appeared from nowhere, and it was starting to rain, making it seem like a steambath. Lewis led them a few blocks down a street that didn't look like New Orleans at all, more like Indianapolis or Cleveland, to a large brick house on a residential street wet with the rain.

"He lives here, ground-floor apartment," Lewis said. But no one was home. They waited for a while, then rode the ferry back to the city again. Like magic the clouds parted, and it was once more glaringly sunny and hot, with double the humidity.

"We'll try Le Vieux Pêcheur," Lewis said, and the three of them went there by cab, but Crabman

wasn't there. They sat around the restaurant for several hours, listening to Smith make sarcastic remarks and sipping iced tea and then changing to beer and going to the men's room often, but Crabman never appeared.

Then Kelso remembered something.

"Could you possibly spare a man to meet me at the Voodoo Museum tomorrow afternoon just before one thirty?"

"Come on, Kelso—" Smith started.

But Detective Lewis regarded Kelso steadily through his metal-rimmed glasses and nodded. "Well, I guess the New Orleans police department can spare one man as a courtesy to the detectives from Indiana."

No one laughed.

Smith was extremely skeptical and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening trying to convince Kelso to change his mind. "They already think we're a couple of small-town hicks. Why add fuel to the fire?"

But Kelso refused to listen.

"You can go by yourself," Smith said as they turned out the light for the night. "I'm not going to some Voodoo Museum and embarrass myself in front of my big-city peers."

"Suit yourself."

The next morning Kelso attended a lecture on computerized

fingerprint searches, ate a po'boy for lunch, and at one twenty-five opened the door of the Voodoo Museum and entered the small, dimly lit office, which he now realized was basically a gift shop. Detective Lewis himself was there with a uniformed cop, and Kelso asked them to wait outside in their car.

"I don't want to scare him away."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Lewis asked. "I don't want to be responsible if you get into trouble—"

"I'll be fine," Kelso assured him, and the two cops left.

The same woman sat behind her desk and took his five dollars, but the other woman, the attractive black lady with the pale eyes, wasn't there. Kelso went through the door at the rear of the gift shop, through the dark narrow corridor, and into the tiny room at the back, with the altar of bones and skulls under the painting of the naked black girl holding the snake. No one else was there. He waited.

He was peering through the dimness at photographs of people who had been blessed by spirits, maybe by making a donation to the museum, when someone coughed behind him, and he turned.

Crabman was there again, towering over him, huge and tall, his black eyes piercing in





the gloom, the same pouch at his throat. His gris-gris.

"Little Billy's dead," Kelso said quietly.

For a moment the big man seemed not to have heard. His face was like black stone. Then the deep bass voice came: "Damballah has her revenge."

"What?"

"Damballah. The snake."

Kelso forced himself not to fall under the spell again, the spell of this man and this museum with its otherworldly potions and spirits and skulls.

"What's in that pouch?"

"Gris-gris."

"Yes, but what's in it?"

"I tell you before. Spices. Herbs. Bat blood. Other things I cannot name."

"Poison," Kelso said. "The poison you put in Little Billy's stuffed crabcakes every time he came to your restaurant, Le Pêcheur, every night this past week. Something that gave him a high fever, something that eventually put him in a coma and killed him. Because he tried to force himself on your ex-wife..."

Even in the dimness of the hot, cramped museum room Kelso could see the sudden frown on Crabman's broad face. Anger spread over the big man's features, making his lips curl and his eyes open wide and his heavy eyebrows lower.

"Poison?" He shook his head emphatically. "No. She say nothing to me about any poison. She say it give him dreams, scare him, help the spell work. She say to sprinkle some each time on his crabcakes, just to give him dreams..."

Kelso frowned. "She told you to sprinkle stuff from that gris-gris around your neck onto Little Billy's crabcakes? In your restaurant? To give him dreams?"

"Dreams."

"You poisoned him, Crabman. You killed him."

Crabman's eyes were fierce. His deep voice resonated in the tiny hot room. "She say nothing about any poison!"

"Shut up!"

It was a woman's high voice, almost a scream.

Kelso stared past Crabman, stepping to one side to see. Standing in the open doorway between the back room and the dark corridor was the young waitress in T-shirt and jeans and sandals, her face contorted in rage, her lips pulled back to show her teeth.

Crabman's head jerked around.

"You don't say nothing to me about *poison*. Just dream powder—"

"Shut up, you fool! Don't talk to him!"

Kelso said sharply, "Crab-



man, did she give you this stuff, the stuff in your gris-gris, and tell you to put it in Little Billy's food?"

The Crabman said nothing.

She stepped up beside the huge man, grabbed his arm, looking frail and insignificant beside him. He glared down at her and muttered disdainfully, "You give me *poison*? For that worthless little man?"

She screamed at him again. "Shut up, you fool!"

"I think you'd better give it to me," Kelso said. He held out his hand.

In the dark, hot confines of the Voodoo Museum's back room, the three of them stood by the altar, with its bones and skulls, and Crabman, sneering, slowly untied the pouch and handed it to Kelso while the young woman began to sob and the black woman in the painting continued to dance with her snake. Damballah.

Crabman and the young woman were arrested outside the museum by Detective Lewis and read their rights. The gris-gris was taken to a police lab and its contents analyzed. They included some ground up chicken bones, powdered garlic, mustard seed, and a quantity of ground roots and leaves from the nightshade

plant, or belladonna. According to the lab, any residual taste would have been completely overpowered by the hot sausage and spices in Little Billy's stuffed crabcakes, and he'd ingested enough over a period of several nights to produce dilated pupils, fever, pounding heartbeat, eventual convulsions, coma, and death.

The young woman, whose name Kelso never learned, had several nightshade plants growing in her apartment and a container of ground nightshade roots and leaves like that found in Crabman's gris-gris, and she was charged with the murder of Little Billy.

Kelso and Smith went back to the Cafe Beignet the next morning and breakfasted on beignets and cafe au lait, on another hot and humid day, but this time no one peered at them over the top of a two-day-old copy of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*.

"I suppose you're feeling very smug," Smith said finally.

"Not really. Sort of sad, if you want to know."

"Why?"

"I think she really believed it. Believed in her own laws. The laws of voodoo."

"Well, she lives under our laws now."

"I suppose."

Smith sipped his coffee. "I still

can't taste any chicory in this stuff. What do you think will happen to that Crabman guy?"

Kelso shrugged. He felt wistful. The whole thing no longer seemed real to him. In a way, it had never seemed real. Maybe it was because he was away from home, or maybe it was the museum, like another world.

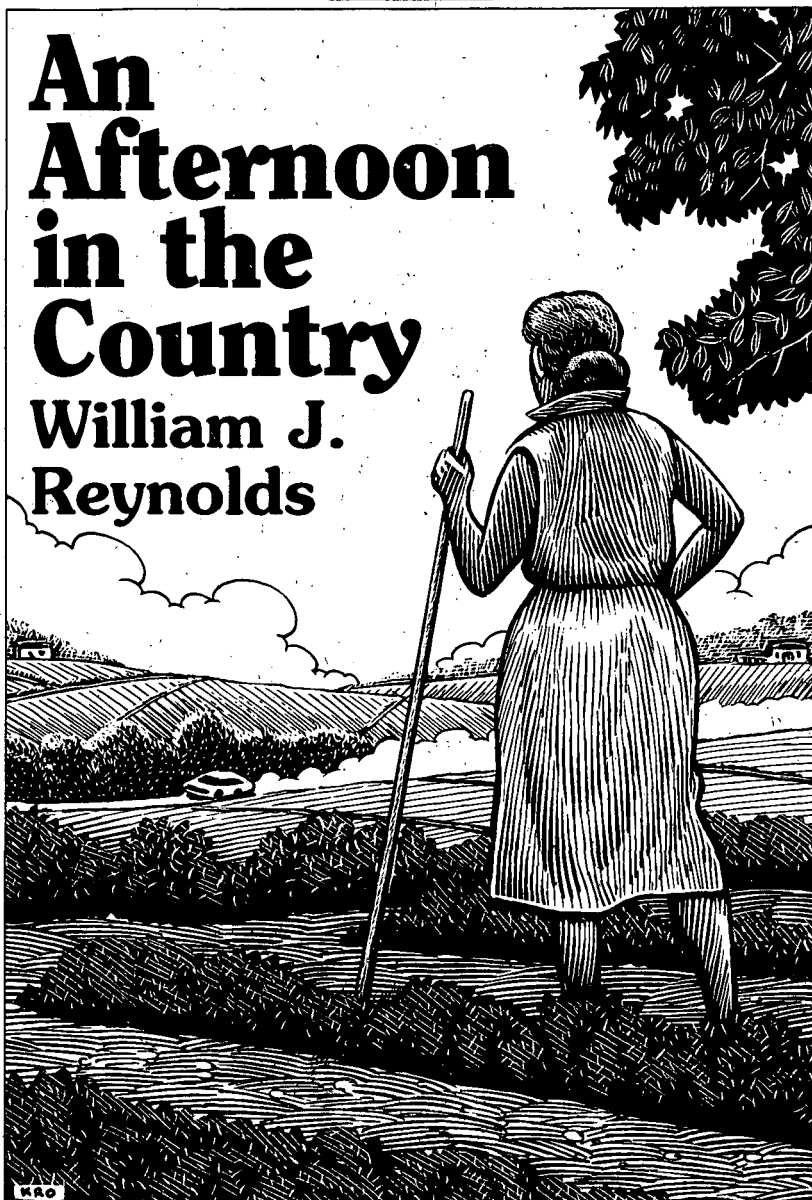
"I suppose he'll keep playing his jazz and eating his soft-shell crabs, and going to the Voodoo Museum every afternoon."

They got an order of beignets to go, walked up to one of the

gray wooden benches facing the river, and sat down with their sunglasses on, in the brightness and heat. Someone had put more Cheerios on the tops of the wooden pilings, and the same stray cat was back, eating them. The thin black man arrived with his metal cup and saxophone and began to play, the same song in the same key, and as Kelso sat and gazed out at the Mississippi, a riverboat steamed past, and the sax man's song blended with the calliope playing "Are You from Dixie?" over and over and over again.

# An Afternoon in the Country

William J.  
Reynolds



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CLOUDS dangled low in the western sky, heavy, blue-gray, like an old, familiar comforter flung across the open landscape of the prairie.

Margaret was in her garden digging the last of the potatoes. She was a compact woman, Margaret Denton was, solid and plain like this isolated old farm on which she had lived her entire sixty-two years; strong and independent and proud in that unassuming way of those who know themselves and are comfortable in the knowledge. She had stayed on when Joseph died, nearly six years ago, and here she would stay as long as the choice was hers to make.

Her father and uncle had bought the farmstead in the midst of the Dust Bowl days, scraping together enough dollars between them to buy the twice-foreclosed property. They had worked it and improved it and held it—sometimes only barely—through Depression and world war. They had raised their families there, six children between them. Later Margaret and Joseph had expanded the farm, nurturing it as they nurtured their own children. Now there was only Margaret and the land.

The wind rose, and dry leaves the color of autumn snaked and skittered around her. The sound was almost like that of approaching footsteps; reflex made Margaret look up, but of course there was no other living soul to be seen, only the crows that dallied in the nearly naked branches of a nearby grove.

Smells like rain, Margaret thought, and went back to her garden fork with renewed vigor.

She worked for another fifteen or twenty minutes, expertly loosening the potatoes from the grasp of the soil and piling them near the edge of the large garden. She split very few. The wind came up again and this time brought with it more than just the sound of dead leaves. A car—still pretty far off, the sound of its engine carried by the wind. Unusual, way out here, to have unannounced company—and for some reason, as she stood there in the bright autumn bluster waiting for the car to come into view, Margaret was immediately certain that the car was coming here.

It was a minute or more before she could see it off in the distance, out on the gravel road. Driving fast, faster than anyone familiar with these narrow, uneven roads would drive. She didn't recognize the vehicle, but that didn't surprise her. It turned off the gravel and onto the hard-packed dirt of her long driveway.

The driver steered the car along the curve around the back of the house, stopping just short of the lawn between the drive and the

garden. A thin cloud of dust swirled over the back of the car, settling on the roof and hood.

The car held three people, who now piled out. They were strangers to Margaret, and she could tell at a glance that they were not from anywhere nearby. They were two men and a woman, none of them yet thirty years old. Dressed the way young people dress, Margaret supposed, especially young people from the city—T-shirts and denim; flannel shirts, untucked and unbuttoned; ugly shoes that reminded Margaret of her father's workboots. One of the men wore a thin mustache and chinwhiskers. The woman's hair was short and very yellow.

They crossed the wide expanse of grass between the driveway and the garden. Margaret waited. There was something about them . . .

"You Mrs. Denton?" the man with the whiskers asked—though he made it sound like a challenge. Margaret noticed a gold stud in one of his earlobes.

"Who are you?"

The young woman moved to the front of the trio, shooting a disgusted look at the man who had spoken, then turning and smiling at Margaret. Somehow Margaret preferred the man's sullenness to the woman's smile. "My friend doesn't have any manners," the woman was saying. "My name's Tracy. This is Jimmy—" she indicated the second man, a tall, lanky youth who surveyed the surrounding buildings and fields with feigned uninterest "—and *this* lump is Keith." She cocked her head at the one with the whiskers. "Are you Mrs. Denton?"

Margaret nodded.

"They told us in town that you might be able to help us. We're interested in the history of this area."

"Really?" Margaret raised her eyebrows. "You don't look like students."

The one called Jimmy laughed, and the woman—Tracy, she had called herself—smiled. "We're still on summer break," she said, and Margaret knew it was a lie. Or a joke; it was hard to tell. "Anyhow, this doesn't have anything to do with school. It's just something we're interested in. Mind if we ask you some questions?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. As you can see, I'm busy, and I'm fighting the weather."

Margaret had barely spoken the words before the other man, Keith, casually pulled back the untucked tail of his lumberjack shirt. The butt of a pistol protruded from the waistband of his rumpled jeans.



She looked up into his face. He was looking at her but without malice, without threat—without any sort of expression at all.

"Oh, that's smooth," Tracy said with derision. "God, Keith, you're about as subtle as a train wreck."

"Let's just get on with it," Keith said. "Ask the old bag so we can get going before a cow eats us or something."

"Smooth," the woman repeated. Then she sighed heavily. "All right. Sorry, Mrs. Denton, but you see how it is. We don't want to hurt you, so you just help us out and we'll get going, okay?"

"What do you want to know?" Margaret said, her voice as flat as the landscape. She thought that she should be more afraid than she was. And she realized that what fear she did feel was sparked not by the unsavory looking men, or the gun, but by the smiling young woman who was speaking.

"Good. That's good. Okay. We heard from this guy that a long time ago there was a bank robbery in a town around here."

Margaret laughed. "You want to know about *that*? It's in every book about the history of this region. Why come to me?"

"We're not big readers," Jimmy said.

"Uh-huh. Well, anyone could tell you about it. Back in the thirties a gang robbed one of the banks in town as you already know. They got away with forty thousand dollars, give or take. A lot of money in those days."

"Still a lot of money," said the one called Keith.

"They made the bank employees and customers stand on the running boards of their car so the police wouldn't shoot as they made their getaway. They lost the police out here on these roads, let their hostages go—oh, about three, four miles off that way. No one ever saw the gang after that. Some folks said it was part of Dillinger's gang, but no one ever knew for sure." She shrugged. "That's pretty much the story."

The younger woman was pursing her lips and frowning as if in thought. "We heard it a little different. The way we heard it, the gang gave the cops the slip, but they were just as lost out here as the cops were. They dumped the hostages so there wouldn't be any witnesses when they buried the money on some abandoned farm."

"Really? Could be, I suppose. No one really knows, I guess—anyone who might have known is long gone now."

Tracy looked around, and her gaze settled on the ancient windmill that stood alongside the long driveway. In the stiff breeze the mill's blades turned steadily but fruitlessly. The farm had gotten

running water forty or more years ago, and Joseph had disconnected the windmill from the well pump some time later. Now it was only picturesque, in a rustic—and rusted—way.

"This guy I mentioned before," Tracy said, looking at the tower. "He said the gang buried the money on an abandoned farm that had a windmill like that one." She pointed, and Margaret's gaze reflexively followed, although of course she was familiar with every bolt and cable on the old thing. The younger woman seemed to be indicating the vane on the mill, which caught the wind and spun the works around to optimize the blades' efficiency. Still barely visible, after all these uncounted decades, was the silhouette of a rooster and the trade name Aerotor.

Margaret said, "There must have been dozens just like that around here back then."

The one called Jimmy, who had done little but study the surroundings since they arrived, now said, "No, everything fits like he said. Different, but there's the windmill with the chicken or whatever and the name Aerotor. There's the grove, and off that way a few miles is the little lake he told us about."

"Who is this 'he' you keep talking about?" Margaret demanded. "One of the gang? Still alive after all this time?"

"Well," Keith said with an ugly giggle, "not any more."

Margaret felt the uneasiness again, now bordering on panic, and fought it down. "What do you want from me?" she said tightly.

Tracy looked at her. She smiled, the smile that Margaret didn't like. "The money, old lady," she said with phony sweetness. "What'd you think?"

"I don't have any money," Margaret said. "Look around this place. If I had any money, don't you think I'd at least get the house painted? Or shingle that barn? Or tear down that shed there before it falls down?"

"So the money's here and you don't know it," Tracy said reasonably, still smiling. "So you won't miss it when we take it."

"Fine, take it and go. Just leave me alone."

"Sure, lady," Tracy said with a slick easiness that bothered Margaret as much as her too-friendly smile. "Sure. The thing is, we're gonna need your help finding it."

"Oh? I thought your 'friend' told you everything you needed to know."

"Well, he was old, and his memory wasn't so good."



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"We had to help him remember a lot of things," said the evil-looking one called Keith.

The other man, Jimmy, had gone back to his survey of the property. "Okay, there's the grove he told us about. There's the windmill. So over there—" he pointed over Margaret's right shoulder, toward the northwest—"there should be those big round things he was talking about."

Margaret looked, but of course there was nothing but the edge of the beanfield that she rented to a neighbor. "Looks like you've got the wrong place," she said quietly. "Like I said, there must be a dozen farms around here with a windmill, a grove, and corncribs—those 'big round things' you're looking for. So please just go now and leave me in peace."

In one quick movement Tracy grabbed the gun from her friend's belt and pointed it at Margaret's face. "We're not stupid, lady. And we didn't come all the way out to the sticks to be jerked around by some old hag who thinks she's clever. This is the place, all right—we've done our homework, and this is the place. The money's here. You can help us find it and maybe live to dig up the rest of your potatoes, or you can keep jacking us around and end up in the ground yourself. Your call."

Margaret hesitated a moment, then sighed. "All right, all right. There used to be some old corncribs over there, west of the grove. They were practically falling down when my father and uncle bought this place before I was born, and they tore them down when I was a little girl."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Show us."

The quartet trudged off, Margaret in the lead followed by Tracy and then the two men. The wind was in their faces now, and it had the chill of winter on it.

Their destination was farther than it had seemed from the garden—distances were that way out here on the flatlands—and by the time they reached the site the three younger people were slightly out of breath. It briefly crossed Margaret's mind that she might be able to snatch the gun while the younger woman was recovering from the short hike, but she immediately dismissed the notion. For one thing she wasn't at all sure that she *could* grab the weapon—Tracy was winded, yes, but by no means on the ropes; for another Margaret wasn't sure what she thought she would do with the gun if she did manage to take it. Better, then, to do what she had done

all her life: keep looking forward, and trust that she would know her opportunity when it came.

"Here," Margaret said when they had reached the spot. "You can still see where the cribs stood." She indicated half-buried, half-crumbling concrete pads that were not quite hidden by the long grasses at the edge of the field.

"Okay," Jimmy said in that vaguely distracted way of his, looking around as if he saw something the others didn't, or expected to. "Then the money would have been buried right about . . . here." He had wandered around the concrete pads a bit, then settled on a spot about ten feet south of the centermost one.

Wordlessly the one called Keith grabbed from Margaret the garden fork she was still holding and began to dig where Jimmy had indicated. Margaret knew it was an inefficient way to go about the task—she had other tools much better suited to breaking through the hard earth—but she kept still and even smiled silently to herself as the youth struggled against the hard ground.

Jimmy's estimate had been pretty close to the mark. Roughly forty minutes later, after the two men had twice traded off the digging chores, Keith struck something that sounded hard. Further excavation revealed it to be the corner of a box or case. They had to dig a bit farther east to extricate the box, which took another half-hour. By the time they lugged it out of the ground, both Jimmy and Keith were sweating profusely in the chill air and breathing heavily.

The box was an old fashioned valise, moldy and crumbling. It emitted a foul, vinegary odor even before the men ripped off the straps and opened the lid. Keith impatiently reached inside and brought out a handful of grayish, dripping muck.

"What the hell?"

Margaret laughed. "Well, there's your money—after sixty years of lying in the ground in a suitcase that doesn't seem to have been very waterproof."

Tracy gingerly lifted out a few scraps that might once have been currency. They fell apart almost as she touched them. "Son of a bitch," she murmured as if to herself.

"You got what you came for," Margaret said coldly. "Now get the hell off my property." With a calmness that she didn't feel, she turned and walked back toward the garden.

What came next happened so fast she didn't realize for several seconds that she had been hit from behind and knocked to the ground. The grass was rough and scratchy against her right cheek;

the gun was cold and smooth against her left. She was not surprised that her assailant was Tracy. Behind the young woman's unctuous smile there had been a coldness, a deadness that Margaret had sensed from the very beginning.

"Stupid old cow," Tracy breathed. "You've lived long enough anyhow."

"What, you think you can find the money yourself? Look around you—there's a hundred and twenty acres in three directions."

"Shut up, cow."

"Wait a minute, Trace." It was Jimmy; he struck Margaret as the only one with a lick of sense. Maybe. "What're you talking about, lady?"

"Nothing as long as I'm lying here." Margaret was well aware of the nearness of the gun, the nearness of Tracy's finger on the trigger, the nearness of death. But she wasn't dead yet, and as long as she could keep it that way, there was a chance, a tiny, slender chance . . .

Eventually, spitting an obscenity, Tracy got off of Margaret, who pulled herself to her feet and dusted herself off.

"All right," she said a little breathlessly. "I wasn't even born when this happened, so I'm sketchy on the details. But from what I understand, my dad and his brother, who farmed together, had heard about the bank robbers' burying their loot around here. Well, it was the talk of the neighborhood back then as you can imagine. Between them they worked out that *this* was the farmstead—it had been abandoned, foreclosed, when they bought it. They followed the same clues you did and found the case right where you found it."

"And they *left* it there? What was the matter—"

Margaret was shaking her head. "Of course not. Think about it—two young men with barely a nickel between them, after sinking everything and more into buying a farm that had already busted two other families in just four years. And then they find forty thousand dollars—forty thousand dollars that belonged to the *bank*, or so they saw it, and they had no love of banks. You think they left it in the ground?" She laughed.

"But they were pretty shrewd in their own way. They realized that if they could find it, so could someone else—possibly the robbers. So they cut butcher paper into dollar-sized strips, bundled them with the paper bands that the money had been bundled with, and soaked it all in a brine of cider vinegar and tea and mud and



Lord knows what else, then packed it back in the case and reburied it where they'd found it."

"Yeah, real interesting," Tracy said sourly, "but either way the money's gone."

"Some of it is," Margaret admitted. "But most of it . . ." Her gaze went beyond the garden, toward a badly weathered old shed that tilted alarmingly toward the south.

"You mean the jerks went to all the trouble of digging up forty grand, then making it look like they *didn't* dig it up, and then they didn't *spend* it? I thought you said they were shrewd."

"They were," Margaret insisted. "If they'd started spending money, someone would have known something was up. So they hid the money and only dipped into it a little bit, now and then, mainly in the early days when they were trying to keep the farm going. After a few years, as the Depression ended and the farm started to pay its own way more and more, they didn't need the money so much. As far as I know, no one's even thought about it for forty, forty-five years."

"That's the craziest thing—"

"Farming is an uncertain life. You always hold something back against a bad season—or a string of them. My father and my uncle looked on that money as a kind of savings account that they could turn to if they needed. If they didn't need to, so much the better." Margaret looked at the old shed again. "Once or twice over the years my late husband and I would talk about doing something with that money—spending it, a little at a time, or slipping it into the bank. But we never did anything about it. I guess we were a little afraid."

"I guess you were a little stupid," Tracy said.

"But we aren't complaining," Keith said. "Show us the money, lady."

"And no tricks."

Margaret shrugged and led them down to the shed, a colorless old pitched-roof affair, open on the east, which looked likely to fall down with the next stiff breeze. In fact, it swayed noticeably with every shift in the wind. The shed was home to all kinds of disused junk, all stacked here and there on the dirt floor under multiple layers of dust and grime. In the center of it all stood a rusted old Ford pickup, once black but now brownish-gray with decades' worth of accumulated dust and bird droppings.

"Under the truck," Margaret told the trio.

"What, another box of muck?"

She shook her head. "They sealed it inside a metal drum. It should still be good. Though I don't know how it'll work for you, trying to spend money that old."

"We found it in Granny's attic," Tracy said derisively. "You let us worry about that."

Margaret shrugged.

Keith looked in the side window of the pickup. "Where's the keys?"

"They've been lost for thirty years or better."

"Then how—"

"Put your shoulder to it," Margaret snapped. "Criminy, I've done it myself, by myself, and when I was a lot older than any of you."

Sighing, Keith climbed in, jammed the stick to neutral, then climbed out and, with Jimmy bracing himself against the opposite fender, backed the old machine out of the shed. As Margaret had indicated, the pickup rolled easily enough—quite easily, in fact, for its size and age—but the ground sloped slightly upward from the shed at that point, which, coupled with the fact that both men were tired from their earlier labors, made the job tougher.

With the pickup out of the way and securely braked, they went to work—this time having brains enough to use an old spade that had been propped in a corner of the shed as well as the garden fork they took from Margaret. Keith and Jimmy dug in tandem, directly in the center of the dirt floor as Margaret had directed, and after only ten minutes' work struck something.

"Feels like wood."

"That's it, then—they put a few old planks across the top of the drum for stability."

"Hell, we'll have to dig up half the floor—"

"No, look, it's pretty rotten, we could just break through." Jimmy took the spade from Keith and struck hard on the planks. The wood splintered under the impact. Then it collapsed entirely. Keith, who had been standing directly on the planks, fell through several inches; then, before he could react, he fell still farther as the planks and the ground immediately surrounding them collapsed inward.

Jimmy had been standing near the edge of the opening, and when the ground shifted, he—already off-balance from jamming the spade down into the hole—fell forward with a shout.

Margaret had been watching from the entrance near the old pickup. Now she grabbed the rusted grain shovel that had lain in the truck's bed for as long as she could remember and swung it as hard

as she could manage, striking Tracy across the stomach. The younger woman doubled up in agony, and Margaret hit her again across her bowed back.

Jimmy was beginning to climb out of the hole. Margaret could hear Keith swearing.

Margaret jumped into the pickup and popped the emergency brake even as she returned the stick to neutral. The truck began to roll down the slight incline, and she fought the steering wheel with all her might.

She hadn't built up as much speed as she'd like—there just wasn't enough room—but the front bumper of the truck rammed the southeast corner of the shed with a jarring crunch. Enough to shake that rickety old structure. With a shudder and a horrendously loud, long creak, the building finally completed the southward list it had begun so many decades before.

Margaret sat at her kitchen table, a mug of hot coffee between her hands. Outside the window above the sink the golden autumn afternoon was turning indigo. When she had explained everything to the sheriff's deputies as they carted away her dazed, bruised, and bleeding tormentors, Margaret had brusquely brushed off their amazement at her presence of mind. Now, however, as she sat alone, Margaret had to admit that she was amazed herself.

Most of what she had told her tormentors had been true—as was most of what she had told the deputies. Her father and uncle had indeed found the money, had indeed concocted the scheme for keeping their discovery a secret. But reburying the loot—what hogwash! The would-be thieves had been correct: who in their right mind wouldn't have spent the money? Margaret's uncle and father had, a little at a time, over the years. Mostly on the farm. Some of it went into safe-deposit boxes, where it could be quietly used as needed—could be and was over the years. Some of it went into bank accounts, again a little at a time, to create a nice nest-egg that eventually had benefited Margaret, her siblings, and their cousins. And still did, Margaret supposed. You could argue that some of that money was still in the banks today, although of course all of the actual cash, the actual notes, was long gone.

Too bad for them that the thieves' instinct didn't outweigh their greed—greed strong enough that they could make themselves believe that two generations would have left a small fortune buried under that dangerous old shed because it was what they'd *wanted*

to believe. Of course all that was there was that rusted and rotting underground fuel tank that she and Joseph should have had removed years and years ago. Well, they had always meant to. But instead they had covered it with planks and dirt and the old Ford pickup for fear that someone might fall through and get hurt . . .

Outside the wind shook the window pane and shook Margaret from her reverie. She got up from the table, went to the sink, and rinsed her cup. Time to think about supper.

It seemed a good night for potato soup.

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FICTION

# THE QUIET COLD

James Sarafin

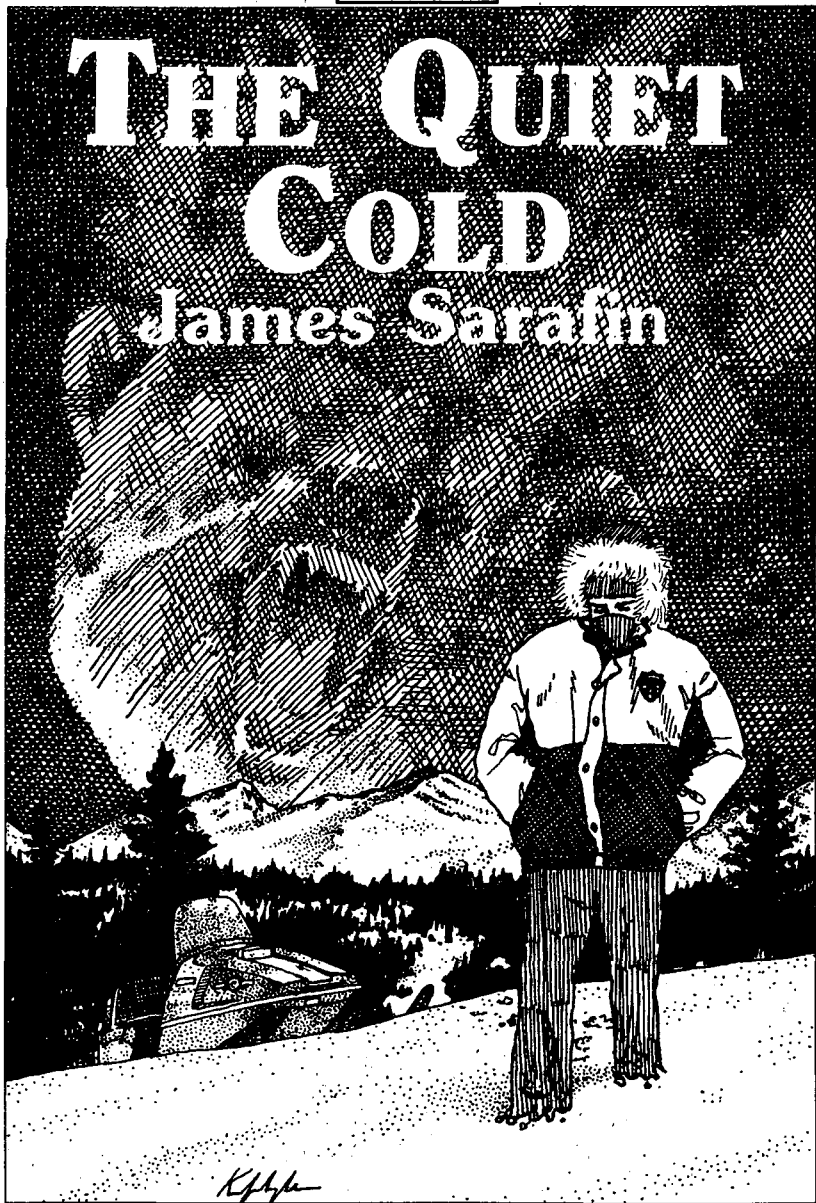


Illustration by Bill Kalpakoglou

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The plane came in first, well after midnight, landing without lights and in silence except for the crunch and schuss of the skis over the wind-hardened snow on the river. Karuk waited in the moonshadows along the bank while the Cessna 206 turned and taxied back toward his position. Over its stuttering engine he could hear the higher-revving sound of snowmachines coming up the river. Five of them arrived, and the riders got off and exchanged a few words with the pilot. And Karuk waited. Waited until they had transferred all the cardboard cases from the plane to the sleds hauled by three of their machines.

He could stop the plane from taking off by pulling his own snowmachine in front of it. But he really needed to bust the local ring, and the pilot might not know very much. So he announced his presence by starting up and driving toward the dark figures standing on the ice.

One of their flashlights illuminated the City of Nuyaaqpalik Police Department logo on the front of his snowmachine. They scattered for their machines, and he opened the throttle to cut them off. Then one of them fired a rifle, and a bullet struck the fiberglass cowling in front of Karuk with a loud crack.

His hand released the throttle

lever and dived into the parka pocket where he carried the Glock .40. His hand stopped there.

Was this really worth shooting someone over?

Karuk had never killed a man. His machine slid to a stop, and he watched the five bootleggers go skimming across the snow, engines roaring, their snowmachines jumping and the long shadows leaping and skittering in their headlights. A breaking laugh, high, almost falsetto, sounded across the expanse of snow. Then they were gone around a bend in the river. Behind him he heard the roar of the plane taking off.

Steam poured from under the cowling and seeped through the cracks in his helmet and mask, brushing warm and wet against his face and carrying the smell of antifreeze. In the motionless air near the riverbank, the steam hung in a little cloud about head high; as he watched, the cloud froze into tiny ice crystals that settled sparkling in his headlight beam. He turned the key to shut down the engine, climbed off the seat, and lifted the cowling. The bullet had shattered the connection of a coolant hose to the engine. Coolant still dripped from the severed hose and fizzled on the hot metal. Duct tape might fix the hose, but he didn't have a



replacement part for the broken connection.

He looked up from the damage and shook his head. It had taken a lot of work in his off-time, tracking in his headlight beam through the almost unbroken night of Arctic December, to find the bootleggers' probable rendezvous. And half a dozen long stakeouts in the cold, getting up to dance and fling his arms around whenever he grew sleepy. All for nothing now.

From his parka zipper hung a plastic thermometer given to him by his nephew; it was bottomed out at twenty-five below, the limit of its gauge. Even in this temperature, he probably could not make it back to Nuyaqpalik without the engine's seizing up. The town's budget had been gutted by the loss of state grants due to declining oil revenues, and the police department could ill afford costly repairs or an engine replacement. His hand-held marine VHF radio was line-of-sight, out of range of town, so he couldn't call for help.

Working quickly, doing one thing at a time and warming his hands in his pockets between doing them, he set his helmet and mask on the seat, put on his headlamp, and tied down the hood of his wolverine-ruffed parka. Then he opened the under-seat compartment, took out a

small pack holding survival gear and a thermos bottle, and slipped his arms through the straps.

A three-quarter moon was high over the bluff to the south as he started downriver. His breath smoked bluey in the moonlight. The winds had blown most of the snow off the center of the river and into drifts along the banks, and snowmachine traffic had left firm footing on the trail. Each footfall sounded with that squeaky crunch expressed only by hard-packed subzero snow. The stars overhead rippled through the dense, cold atmosphere, and he saw the faint point of a satellite tracking to the northwest. Once he caught a whiff of distant woodsmoke from some homesteader's or trapper's cabin. But the exercise kept him warm, and he didn't bother looking for it.

Hours later he had left the bluff behind him, and the country leveled and flattened all around. The riverbanks rose no more than waist-high, and nothing protruded from the dim whiteness of the snow except for the occasional tuft of tundra vegetation. The moon had set, and he moved under starlight.

He came to where the river made a long loop to the west and went on in that direction for several miles before it

turned back to the south. The trail left the river here, headed due south. Even without their tracks left plain in the snow, he knew the bootleggers had come this way; he and they were going to the same place. Town. The only place for them to dispose of their cargo.

They always brought in the same kind of booze: cheap vodka, gin, and whisky, packed in cases of twelve and bottled in shelf-brand "traveler's" plastic to cut down on weight. Probably bought retail in a warehouse store in Anchorage or Fairbanks; all the taxes paid, so no reason to interest the feds. The kind of liquor that might only be of concern to local police—if it was being sold for two hundred dollars a bottle in an Eskimo community that had voted itself dry under Alaska's local option law. As Nuyaqpalik had done following the murder of Karuk's predecessor, the town's last chief of police, in a bar two years ago.

Karuk knew just how the *taannaq* would smell. How it would taste, on the first drink, how it would taste on the ones after, then how cool and slick it would feel in the throat when you couldn't taste it any more.

He had to toil harder in the deeper snow, his boots sometimes breaking through the packed crust on the trail and

sinking thigh deep into the lighter, looser snow beneath. His legs moved ceaselessly, and in the faint starlight he saw his breath appear and vanish and appear and vanish over and over. The vapor of his breath coated his lower face with ice and froze the ruff of his parka hood to both sides of his jaw. Still, he wasn't cold as long as he kept walking, except for his feet. When he topped a rise in the tundra plain, he could see the morning lights of town, far across the dim expanse of the Sound, shimmering like the stars in the cold, thick air.

The tundra plateau sloping below him showed the dark lines of many snowmachine tracks converging toward the crossing to town. The tracks of the bootleggers mingled there with those of hunters, trappers, travelers, and sport riders. Just about everybody in town had a snowmachine. He tried the radio but picked up only static; he must have neglected to recharge the battery, or else it had been weakened by the cold.

Beside a tussock that showed its head of dried, brown grass above the white surface, one of the bootleggers' machines seemed to have left the trail and bogged down in the deeper, unpacked snow. He twisted on his headlamp and stopped to study the signs. It looked like

the others had circled around so they could help push, dig the stuck machine out. Most of the tracks were unreadable in the deep, light snow, but he found a single clear footprint where one of them had stepped on the trail to mount his machine. It looked like the bootlegger was wearing sneakers.

Sneakers? In this weather? Some of the newer, water-cooled machines had their radiators located along both sides of the track; they kept the floorboards hot enough that a rider wearing sneakers probably wouldn't lose toes to frostbite. Still, the risk of a breakdown made it foolhardy to go so far out of town without a pair of insulated boots. Maybe the bootlegger was too drunk himself to know better.

He went on, and the sky grew brighter with the blush of false dawn on the horizon ahead, to the south. The wind picked up as he approached shore, gusting, throwing up dervishes of dry powder that marched across the pack ice and up the beach, where they died against the heavier snow on the tundra. His breath plumed pinkly in the dawn light, and he stopped to break the ice away from his face and take a long drink of cold cocoa from the thermos. His slight hope of finding someone to give him a ride the last five miles to town faded; there was no one

else or sign of movement or other living thing anywhere in sight. The roseate glimmer of dawn had moved slightly west along the horizon, turning into the magenta of dusk as the sun sank away from the world again. The stars reappeared, twinkling thickly, and it was night again.

The snow creaked faintly under his boots as he hit the trail across the sea ice. The trail curved back and forth to skirt the leads and jams caused by the tides, which broke and shifted sections of the pack ice around as if in reduced representation of the tectonic plates of the earth. After a time he heard the faint crackling of the aurora, and when he paused to look up, the stars directly overhead had vanished behind a wide, shimmering band the color of jade that streamed like some enchanted river in the sky.

His feet were slowing, beginning to stumble, when he came into the north end of town under the floodlights of the dock. Some of the houses along the shore had strung up Christmas lights, but the barge office was undecorated and showed only a dim glow from inside. He climbed up the short, steep beach and noticed someone standing in the shadows by the door, as if waiting for him.

"Charlie?" the man called to him. "I wondered who was walking out there." Rich Stahl, the barge company's watchman, stayed on the payroll year-round, even after the ice shut down the sea lanes.

On Karuk's birth certificate, his driver's license, credit cards, the mortgage on his house, magazine subscriptions, junk mail, and every other thing brought by the European Americans, he was Charles W. Henderson. The only living person who used his Eskimo name was his mother.

Of course there were still the dead to answer to. Even if they never spoke. The whites did not believe, but the Inupiat could sometimes see ghosts. Charlie knew a man's friends and relatives—and perhaps his enemies—could come back from the other side.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Almost six P.M.," Rich said. "Where've you been? Nick and Carl must have asked everyone in town, looking for you since this morning."

Charlie told him, and Stahl shook his head. "Jesus, you mean you just came more than twenty miles on foot? It's thirty-eight below."

Charlie went into the barge office to use the phone. The heat burned on his face, and he had to open his parka immediately.

He accepted a cup of old, burnt-smelling coffee and passed it gingerly from hand to hand. The air seemed far too warm in the office, and while he was waiting for Nick, he went outside, the coffee steaming madly in the mug, to watch the aurora. It looked pale and washed-out now, beyond the lights of the town.

**E**ven at full blast, the defroster in the police Blazer was losing its war against the cold; only the center of the windshield remained clear of frost, through which Charlie peered as if out of a tunnel. Officer Nick Totemoff, an Aleut from St. George Island, drove the creaking vehicle delicately on the gravelly ice that constituted the normal winter surface of the town's streets, as if he were afraid it might come apart on one of the deeper ruts. Which it well might.

They pulled off the road at the police station and got out. The gravel parking lot felt as hard and smooth as concrete under the surface snow; cold weather had come right after a heavy autumn rain, leaving most of the lot covered with a sheet of ice. Nick opened the front door, said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you—your nephew's been by to see you three or four times since school let out."

Charlie went into his office. He looked at the log, shook his head. Two domestic violence calls, a drunk driving arrest, two young men picked up for a drunken fight at the bingo hall—all in the last twenty-four hours. For a year or so after the vote to go dry, things had been quiet, people had treated each other decently, the community hardly seemed to need a police force any more. Now it was almost as bad as in the old days when they had been running three or four drunk-and-disorderlies a day, a murder or suicide every month. If he could stop this new bootleg enterprise, the town might make it through winter without any more deaths.

He was about to leave when he glanced at his calendar. Damn. It was Friday, and that council meeting was tonight at seven; the mayor had made a point of asking him to be there. Now he didn't even have time for a shower, just maybe a bite of food if he hurried.

In the lobby entry his nephew was stamping snow off his boots.

"Johnnie, I've got to run to a meeting," Charlie said. "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"But it's important, Uncle Charlie!"

Charlie put his hands on the boy's shoulders, trying not to sag. Johnnie's father had left

years ago, and his mother, Charlie's older sister, had taken to drinking and snorting cocaine, not staying in town for more than two weeks at a stretch. Four years ago they'd found her strangled in a Fairbanks park, her skirt pulled up to her chest and panties twisted around one ankle. Johnnie, now thirteen, was living with Charlie's mother. He said he wanted to be a cop. If he kept getting good grades, Charlie knew he could do better.

Charlie could feel the warmth of the room bringing the weariness out of the depths of his bones and into his face. He had been walking for sixteen hours, without sleep for thirty-five. He had to stay alert for the meeting, but all he wanted was a quick meal and the moment of collapsing into bed.

"John-guy, let's talk tomorrow, okay? I'll come to dinner at Grandma's, and we can talk then."

The boy started to object again but then nodded. He stood outside watching as Charlie left in the Blazer.

The lights were on in the second floor council room when Charlie reached the City Offices building. Clouds had moved in close overhead, the temperature seemed to be rising slightly, and a wind had started blowing in

off the Sound. Looked like more snow on its way.

Charlie was a few minutes late but had arrived before three of the council members. He found a seat among the audience chairs. The minority group of whites on the council always thought it important to start on time; they fidgeted, sighed, glared at the clock.

Charlie's eyes would not stay open, and he tried to keep awake by concentrating on the sounds in the room. The rising wind rattled the panes of the front windows. Two steps on the upper part of the stairs squeaked every time someone came up. The old radiators creaked and groaned constantly as they shed heat into the drafty room. Like most of the town's structures, the City Offices building was poorly constructed, thrown together in haste by an outside contractor who hadn't lingered one minute after his final payment.

The last member arrived, and the council moved through the agenda. Finally the mayor called to Charlie.

"Chief, what's going on with these bootleggers? I hear there's a lot of new liquor coming into town for the holiday parties."

Charlie told them about the preceding night's events.

"You shouldn't have gone out there by yourself, with them

carrying guns," one of the Eskimo women said.

"Two of our officers are out with the flu," Charlie said. "Which leaves us short-handed even with Nick pulling overtime. I couldn't go out there without leaving someone behind for the town."

"I've said this before, but the police have better things to do," said Will Davis, one of several council members who had formerly owned interests in liquor establishments. "Al and I bowed to the will of the majority and shut down the Seal & Harpoon when the vote came in, but the city won't never stop people who want to drink. Prohibition just don't work."

Al Briggs, one of the white members, who still owned the town's general store, leaned forward, rested his elbows on the table, and put his chin in his hands. "Well, I agree people ought to have a constitutional right to drink in the privacy of their homes. But we've got to try to stop the bootlegging so long as it's against the law. Though I am skeptical we'll succeed."

"At least you found where they're landing, how they're bringing it in," the mayor said. He had been a strong supporter ever since Charlie had tracked down the boy who murdered Chief Tigges.

"Yeah, but it doesn't mean

much," Charlie said. "They'll just find another place to land the plane now."

"No offense, Charlie," Briggs said, "but these bootleggers always seem to be one step ahead of you. I think once the holidays have passed, maybe we should ask the state troopers to come in on this investigation."

"Why wait until after the holidays?" asked the white woman who was married to the local Presbyterian minister; the couple had been leaders of the prohibition lobby. "I should think we'd want to stop this *before* all the holiday celebrations."

"Because the troopers will probably be too busy dealing with things in Anchorage and Fairbanks until then," Briggs replied. "But after the holidays, we might have a chance to get a couple of them up here."

"They was here two months ago and didn't find nothing," the mayor said.

Charlie shrugged; he was so tired he could hardly make out their words. "The bootleggers just hole up, stop bringing in the booze and selling it, while the troopers are here."

"Well," Briggs continued, "again meaning no offense, but maybe you're just a little too close to this problem."

Everyone was silent. They all knew Briggs was referring to the time when Charlie drank,

even as an officer on the force. When they were likely to find him—had anyone bothered to look—drunk in the office or in his truck or in a bar. Back in the days when he'd begged drinks or dollars, at various times, from most of the people in the room.

"That's not fair," the mayor said. "You always liked the bottle pretty good yourself, Al."

"I said I didn't mean any offense."

The rest of them waited, apparently for Charlie to make some response, to defend himself or deny or explain or even, in the way of the reformed alcoholic, acknowledge Briggs's statement, but he had nothing to say. The council moved on to other matters, tabled all outstanding issues until the January meeting, and adjourned promptly at eleven o'clock. Later Charlie couldn't even remember going home, undressing, and dropping into bed.

He woke at five thirty A.M., wondering if his body had forgotten how to sleep, and was in the office by seven. He and Nick left town across a new layer of snow to retrieve the broken-down snowmachine. They rode double on Nick's machine to reach the site and had the damaged machine towed back to



town before the twilight of dusk had faded.

They drove to the big four-bay garage shared by the police and fire departments; and Charlie went in through the side to open the overhead door to one of the vacant bays. Three firemen were playing cards at a table in the rear with Carl Baldwin, the dayshift police officer. They stopped in mid-bet as Charlie came in and hit the door switch. After Nick pulled the two machines in, Charlie hit the switch again to close the door and turned around. The four were still looking at him.

"What's up?"

The firemen looked down, and Carl cleared his throat.

"Charlie, I tried to reach you on the radio. Your nephew Johnnie—we found him this morning, on the shore under the dock. He's . . . dead."

In the cavernous garage Charlie heard the groaning of the water pipes that ran along the inside wall and the slow ticking of Nick's snowmachine engine as it cooled. The telephone jangled eight or nine times over the intercom speakers; no one moved to pick it up.

"Oh hell," Charlie finally said.

"He didn't come home last night—your mother said he was supposed to be staying overnight at a friend's. Apparently he never made it there. It looked

like he froze to death, but . . . no results from the medical examination yet."

The phone started ringing again.

"Nick, will you get that?" Charlie said; then, to Carl: "What else were you going to say?"

"Well, uh . . . it sort of smelled like the kid was drinking." Carl paused, then went on. "The mayor said to call the troopers, so I did. Two of them are coming up tomorrow from Anchorage if they can get here."

"You sure it was him?"

Carl nodded. "Your mother confirmed the I.D. I, uh, took her statement. Hope you don't mind me doing it."

"No." They both knew it was better if a relative didn't do it.

Charlie went through the door that connected the garage to the police station. Drinking? Johnnie? He had always been a good boy, never in much trouble, never doing anything real bad past the point of normal boy mischief. Where would he have gotten anything to drink? It didn't make sense.

He caught himself; he sounded like all the other parents and relatives whenever one of their kids got into trouble.

He checked the messages left on his desk. Two, no three calls from the mayor. One from the troopers. Another from . . .

His mother.

He turned and found Carl standing in the door, watching him.

"Charlie, your mother said Johnnie was excited about something yesterday. She didn't know what, but it was something he saw on the way to school—something to do with the bootleggers."

"Great. And he did try to tell me." Charlie zipped up his parka and headed out into the cold. He did not bother with the Blazer; he had less than half a mile to go. The hardened snow on the street squeaked under his boots. An intersection street light glowed out of a broad halo of ice fog settling downwind from the station's boiler emissions, the fine, chilly crystals brushing his face as he passed.

All Charlie had had to do was listen to Johnnie and the boy might still be alive. What if his death had been no accident?

He went by several small businesses, a welding shop, a florist, a septic service for homes not connected to the city sewer system. At the third intersection he turned left, toward shore. Just ahead was the general store, its parking lot well-illuminated by the overhead and storefront lights. The boarded-up bar across the street lay in darkness.

As he passed the store, a

group of teenage boys came gunning out of the lot on four snow-machines, nearly running him over. They took a long look at Charlie and throttled back.

"Oh, sorry, man," one said.

"Joey, you boys better take it easy," Charlie said, glad for the distraction. "Hey, that's a brand-new Polaris, ain't it?"

The boy nodded, his face invisible behind the tinted helmet screen.

"Nice. Your dad's?"

"Mine." Joey paused. "Got it with my NANA dividend."

The Native regional corporation recently had made good money on sale of oil exploration rights and royalties from the zinc mine; annual shareholder dividends had been the largest in years. Charlie had not yet decided how he would spend his own but had been thinking of a vacation to someplace warm and exotic. Costa Rica, maybe. Anywhere to get away from Nuyapalik for a while.

The four boys pulled slowly into the street, came to a full stop at the intersection, and signaled a left turn. They were half a mile down the road before he heard their engines rev up to a full-throated roar. Charlie walked on, passing some of the town's older houses, the low-lying wood shanties that were barely removed from the sod dwellings their ancestors had sunk into the

tundra only a few generations before. A block from shore he turned right down a narrow street, toward the house at the end of a cul-de-sac. The house looked dark, uninhabited; no lights shone from inside. He knocked lightly on the front door, then opened it and went in. The floor at the entry sagged under his weight. He had been meaning to replace the joists that were rotting there.

She was sitting in the kitchen beside an old Franklin stove, looking out the window through which could be seen, between two other houses, the lighted surface of Shore Avenue and nothing but the darkness of the ice beyond.

"Mother," he said in Inupiaq, "I say you should lock your door. These aren't the old days."

The light of the fire flickered faintly out of the stove's air vents. Her face looked cracked and yellowed in that light. He would have thought that she had expended all her tears long ago, for his father, his brother, and his sister; but the tracks glistening down her face said otherwise.

"It's so quiet here again, Karuk. I don't think I can stand the quiet any more."

He wanted to ask her questions—when had she last seen him, where was he supposed to have been, when was he expect-

ed home? But Carl had already asked the questions, and the troopers would come tomorrow or the next day and ask them all again. If he asked, she might think he was blaming her—when really only one person might be at fault for Johnnie's death: he, Karuk, Charlie Henderson.

"If only he'd worn his parka," she was saying. "He went out with just his jacket. How can he do that? I always tell him, 'Wear your parka.' But these boys, they don't listen to an old woman."

He pulled a chair from under the table and sat with her. After a time she rose to offer him tea, and then food. Later, when she asked if she should make up his old bed, he did not refuse.

**T**he chief of police couldn't get a drink even if he needed one badly. Most of the people in town, including some who had helped vote it dry, probably had a bottle or two, smuggled in past the airport search or mailed by friends in other places. Even those who didn't keep their own bottle, including the other police officers, would know someone who did. But not Charlie; he had deliberately avoided such knowledge, and others had wordlessly joined in that objective.

That lack of knowledge might have been the only thing that kept him from going on a binge the next day. Usually when the thirst hit, he would force himself to wait until it went away. But drinking this time would have been too easy—compared to driving to the morgue.

"His blood alcohol was .531," said the doctor who served as the local state medical examiner. "More than five times the limit for drunk driving. The kid must have drunk a whole bottle by himself—or more. I still haven't decided whether to list this as death by hypothermia or acute alcohol poisoning. That much alcohol would have killed him at any temperature probably."

Johnnie's body looked as pale as any white boy's under the bright fluorescent lights. His clothing had been removed and placed in labeled bags. This is not him, Charlie told himself. Johnnie has gone someplace else.

"Looks like he got in a fight earlier," the doctor added, looking up from the chart in his hand. "See the bruises on his face? And there's a patch of hair ripped out of the back of his head."

Charlie moved slowly to the head of the table and forced himself to look closely. It's not really him . . .

"He didn't die from any fight injuries, though," the doctor continued. "The bruises had time to form, so they had to have been made several hours before death. There's no sign of concussion or skull frac—"

"What caused this?" Charlie pointed to thin, bruised cuts, curved and less than an inch long, running along the center of the boy's upper and lower lips.

The doctor shrugged; he wasn't long out of a California medical school and had already seen more than a few Eskimo boys laid out on his table like this. "I assume that maybe he was punched by someone who was wearing a ring."

Maybe. A memory suddenly flashed out of the days that were mostly lost to the alcoholic haze: walking in the dark somewhere, the bottle tilted up—and running into the side of someone's truck. Leaving a cut like that on Charlie's own lips; he saw an image of himself inspecting it in the mirror of a gas station restroom.

"Could a bottle do that? If it was forced into his mouth?"

The doctor shrugged again. "Maybe. What kind of bottle?"

"How about one of those hard plastic traveler's bottles the bootleggers sell? I can probably turn up an evidence sample if you need one."

"I can probably find one around." The doctor's face reddened slightly. "Your theory is he was forced to drink it? Look, Chief Henderson, I know he was your nephew, but that would be hard for someone to do."

Charlie was looking at the boy's arms. "What could make those round bruises on the insides of his wrists?"

The doctor looked. Then he straightened and swallowed. "A knee. Knees, I mean."

"Like maybe two guys were kneeling on his wrists while someone else poured?"

"The officer who brought him in didn't say anything about treating this as a possible homicide. I thought this was just another . . ."

"... dead drunk?" Charlie finished.

The doctor pulled off each latex glove with a snap and flung them in the trashcan, shaking his head in disgust. "I'm sorry—at least I don't usually make the same mistake twice. There's some dried blood under his fingernails—I did at least collect a sample, and I'll get it rushed to the lab. Any idea how soon you might need the results?"

Charlie turned to take his parka off a hook. "I'd appreciate knowing as soon as possible."

He went out and sat without starting the Blazer. So many of his family and friends were

gone, and several of them his fault. His younger brother, lost overboard when they'd both been drinking and Charlie's boat hit a snag in the river. His sister, whom he might have saved if he'd tried harder to keep her in that rehab program. Tigges, the last chief of police, killed by a knife that Charlie could have taken from the killer. He had seen some of their ghosts. None of them had ever come back to blame him—Tigges had actually returned to say that it wasn't Charlie's fault. But the weight of all those dead . . .

And now Johnnie—dead because Charlie hadn't bothered to listen to him for five minutes.

Carl or Nick would know where he could get a drink.

In the spring when he was twelve, Karuk and another boy lay on the offshore ice beside a seal hole, holding an old pump .22 rimfire. They could not shoot the seal as soon as it came up for air or it would sink; they had to wait for it to come out all the way to lie in the sun. Then Karuk would try to shoot it in the brain. They had waited a long time when they saw the white bear coming across the ice. The other boy urged Karuk to leave and walked away in a direct line from the bear, in the way they had been taught, to minimize the sense of move-

ment. For some reason he could never explain, even to himself, Karuk stayed. He watched the bear grow larger, quickening its pace, breaking into a charge at a hundred yards. Karuk saw the bear's breath steaming, gobs of saliva dropping from its gums. A bright metallic taste filled his mouth, as if he held the rifle there instead of in his hands.

Later the men could only look from the great dead bear to the toy rifle and shake their heads. It was then that Karuk started getting a reputation as a wild, wild boy. And only much later, when he remembered how he had waited for the bear, that he discovered how to wait before taking a drink. If you could wait a moment, you could wait another. You could wait for an hour. And then another hour after that. Just keep waiting.

He wanted to drive on, and on—but the roads all dead-ended within a few miles of town. There was nowhere to go. When he found himself at the north end of town by the dock, he parked and knocked on the office door.

"Hi, Charlie," Rich Stahl said through a crack in the door. "What's up?"

It didn't look like he was going to be invited in. Charlie asked if he could see where the body had been found.

"I already showed Carl. And answered all the questions."

Charlie said he'd like to see the place for himself anyway. Stahl went to get his coat, then led the way down the steep, narrow beach and under the dock and pointed his flashlight beam to a point between two pilings. The snow had been depressed there, but no clear markings had survived the new and drifting snow. The wind whipped along the shore, funneled by the dock. Hard, crystalline flakes stung Charlie's face; he turned to put his back to the wind and face Stahl.

"When did you find him?"

"Like I told Carl, I got up yesterday morning, went out to make my rounds, and saw him just lying there."

"Huh." Charlie tried to look thoughtful.

"Something the matter with that?"

"I was just wondering why you'd go look under the dock."

"Sometimes I do. Just to check things out. That's my job."

"Uh-huh. Find any tracks?"

"No." Stahl shrugged. "Nothing that looked fresh. It was blowing, drifting almost as bad as right now." The snow on the beach was cratered with numerous old footprints; several sets of snow-machine tracks had been drifted over and filled in. No way to know if they had been made the

day before or weeks earlier.

"You didn't see or hear anything at all that night?"

"No. Well, not really. I forgot to mention to Carl that I did hear some kids fooling around on their snowmachines on the beach."

"Why do you think they were kids?"

"I don't know." He was shivering. "I didn't get a look at them or anything."

"Did you hear them say anything?"

"Uh . . ." Stahl closed his eyes and his face cinched up. "I guess I heard a couple of them yell at each other. Just sounded like kids, teenagers, you know?"

Stahl shrugged deeper into his coat; he kept looking away, maybe trying to keep his face out of the wind, too.

"You got something else to add, Rich?"

Stahl tried to smile. "Yeah, well . . . if your family sues over this, it could mean my job."

"Any reason for someone to sue the barge company?"

"No. Oh, hell, Charlie—you know everybody sues over everything these days."

No use in hanging around here longer. Carl would have taken a look when he recovered Johnnie's body; there was nothing about this place that told Charlie anything now. And he had heard the plane from Anchorage come in and land, which meant the troop-

ers would be waiting for him.

Charlie recognized them in the airport lobby, the same men who had come before, now wearing two of the heaviest parkas he had ever seen. They had just picked up their bags. The two white men each stood well over six feet tall and almost a foot above Charlie's own head. Outside they grunted at the cold, threw their bags in the back seat, and squeezed shivering into the front of Charlie's Blazer. One asked if Charlie had learned who the dead boy had been with last, and Charlie shook his head.

"No. But I think he was murdered."

The troopers looked at each other, and the one in the middle of the seat said, "Why do you say that, chief?"

"I saw the body this morning." He told them about the bruised wrists and lips. "I think they held him down and made him drink it."

"He was your nephew, wasn't he? Lived with your mother?"

"Yeah." Charlie pulled into the office lot and shifted into park. "Did you read the witness reports we faxed?"

The officer next to the passenger door, the quiet one, hesitated before getting out. His hand had cracked the door open, then just held the handle. "He told your mother he'd seen some-



thing about the bootleggers. You could be right. I can't imagine how a kid wouldn't pass out before he could drink that much on his own. Even if he was a hard drinker with a lot of tolerance for the stuff."

"He didn't drink at all."

In the morning, when he went out on the porch of his mother's house, the temperature had dropped again though the air was still. Ever since awakening, Charlie had been nagged by the feeling that he was missing something important. He paused to zip his parka before going toward the main street. When he looked up, he saw someone walking ahead of him, passing into the range of the street light at the intersection. Someone familiar.

It was Johnnie.

Charlie paused only a moment. When he had seen the ghosts of his brother and his friend Tigges, they had simply come to stand in front of him. Johnnie's was walking away.

"Hey," Charlie called, "where are you going?"

Johnnie stopped to look at him. There was no sign of the boy's breath condensing under the street light. The air was still, yet Johnnie's light jacket flapped and ruffled as if a strong wind were coming up the street from shore.

Charlie waited; the dead, he believed, always had a reason to come to you. But Johnnie wouldn't say it, for the dead do not speak.

Johnnie turned and went down the street, hunching his shoulders away from the wind that touched only him. Following silently behind, Charlie noticed that Johnnie carried his school pack on his back. They went a few blocks, then Johnnie turned right down an alley that ran beside the general store and passed out of view behind another building. Charlie hurried to catch up. He looked down the alley, but couldn't see Johnnie any more.

Charlie ran forward, his boots scuffing on the worn patches of ice in the street as he tried to keep up. He paused only briefly to check the intersection with another alley that ran behind the store—empty—and ran on. He went all the way to the next street, then came back to the intersection and checked again. Johnnie was gone. All he saw was the dumpster and the double doors at the rear of the general store.

**I**t was not enough for a cop to know. What Charlie knew would do no good without admissible evidence for the court. A few confessions would work fine, but

suspects didn't usually confess just because they were arrested. Most would only protest their innocence, would even continue protesting throughout their prison terms, as if by the sheer persistence of the denial they could rewrite their own history. Unless—sometimes—they knew you could tie them to the physical evidence.

Charlie drove his repaired snowmachine to the north end of town around eight o'clock that evening. The light glowed dimly through the curtained window of the barge office. He knocked, waited, saw the curtains move, knocked louder.

"I'd like to talk to you some more, Rich," he said through the crack of the door. Stahl let him in and immediately took a seat at the little kitchen table with his back to the wall. He waved for Charlie to take the other chair. A pot of coffee was cooking on the burner and a half-full cup was in Stahl's hand. Charlie couldn't smell a trace of booze in the room.

"You look tired, like you're not getting near enough sleep," Charlie said. "Maybe you need to tell me what really happened that night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The cold really bothers you, doesn't it, Rich?"

"Maybe more than some peo-

ple, yeah. So what are you getting at?"

"Well, it's just sort of funny. Cold and blowing like it was that morning, I can't see you going down to the beach to take a look under the dock."

Stahl's poker face collapsed. He put his elbows on the table and dropped his face into his hands. "This is really eating at me. I told you and Carl I really didn't see or hear anything . . . I'm sorry, Charlie. This'll cost me my job, but it's my fault Johnnie Lee's dead."

"Maybe, maybe not. Tell me what happened."

"That night . . . it was late, around midnight. I heard snowmachines come down the beach and . . . when I heard those kids arguing, it sounded like they were under the dock. Then another machine came up the street and went down there, and I heard his voice—that was an adult man, though I didn't recognize it. I got bundled up and went out with the flashlight, and then they took off. It was blowing snow and real cold, like you said, and I . . . just went back inside." He lifted his head and struggled to look directly at Charlie. "So it's my fault he's dead."

"What do you mean?"

"If I'd just gone down there, shone the flashlight under the dock . . . They must have left

him behind. Johnnie froze to death because I didn't even check."

Both men studied the floor. After a few minutes, Charlie said, "I think he was probably already dead by then. They would have hid him in some better place if you hadn't shown up. Do you know what time this happened?"

"Well, it must have been a bit after eleven because I always go to bed then, but I hadn't fallen asleep yet."

"Did you hear what the man, the one on the last machine, was saying?"

"A little bit. You know how the wind can snatch up a conversation and carry it? When I opened the door, I heard him shout, 'You used it all? My last bottle?' Or something like that. He was definitely mad."

"This is real important. When they took off, which way did they go?"

"To the south, back into town."

"You didn't hear any of them go north, across the Sound?"

"Don't think so. No, they all went south."

Charlie had to get up, move his feet, toward the sink. He dug out a cup that wasn't too dirty, then looked back at Stahl. "Now, this is important, too. Last night or the night before, did you hear anyone come by, heading north?"

Stahl shook his head firmly. "And I'd know because I haven't been sleeping very well—like you said, Charlie."

Charlie poured himself some coffee. "Could be a long night, Rich."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll just wait here and listen."

"For what? They won't come back here, will they?"

Charlie couldn't tell Stahl that they were listening for a snowmachine heading north, that it would come, he was sure, sometime—if not tonight, then within the next few days. Charlie would wait here every night for a month if he had to. But he could not explain this to Stahl because Nuyaqpalik was a small town, and if it didn't happen tonight, he wanted to make sure it had the chance to happen tomorrow night or the night after.

"Actually, I should make a call first," he said. "You got a phone back in the bedroom?"

Stahl nodded, and Charlie shut the bedroom door, then called Nick at the station.

"You know Joey Hensen and the boys he hangs around with, playing video games over at the store?"

"Sure. You mean those cousins of his?"

"That's them. I'm down here on stakeout at the barge office."

If you get a call from Rich later tonight, you and the troopers should go round up Joey and the others. One or more of them should have fresh scratches, and ought to match the blood samples the medical examiner has."

Charlie went outside, lifted the cowl of his snowmachine, and yanked out the headlight wires so it wouldn't go on when he started up. He and Rich went through most of a fresh pot of coffee, and it was almost midnight when he heard a single machine come down the shore below the dock and head off across the ice.

"Well, thanks, Rich," Charlie said. "I'm in a hurry, so will you give Nick a call?"

"What should I say?"

"Just that I told you to call. He'll know what to do." Charlie shrugged quickly into his parka. "You can tell him I'm going to pick up the son of a bitch that killed Johnnie."

He headed his own machine down the shore and onto the ice, cautiously at first as his eyes adjusted. But a nearly full moon hung to the south, and the light was good enough to follow the trail easily.

Half a mile ahead Karuk could see the other machine's light moving across the ice, then up the far shore, the light bobbing over the rolling tundra,

darkened plumes spraying to both sides of the track. He closed in. By the time the other machine was slowing, he was only a hundred yards behind. He hit the kill switch as soon as he saw the other come to a stop on the trail. The man removed his helmet, stepped to the back, and took something out from under the seat. He turned and dug in the snow behind the machine, knelt, and reached into the hole. He got up and put something in his left pocket, then something else in the underseat compartment. His feet kicked snow back into the hole. Then he stopped, apparently seeing the dark form of Karuk's machine on the trail. Karuk started the engine and closed the distance, stopping about ten feet away.

Karuk took off his own helmet. "I figured you'd be getting thirsty pretty soon . . ."

"I'm stuck," a familiar voice replied. "I'm trying to dig out."

" . . . but I was afraid you might wait until the troopers had gone."

"'Fraid I don't know what you mean, Charlie. Last time I checked, in this country a man's still free to go for a ride when he wants to."

Karuk let go of the handlebars, flexing his fingers. "Nick and the troopers should be picking up those boys of yours

right about now. I expect they'll be saying plenty by morning."

"What boys?"

"I should have figured out that much when I found that sneaker print out here. Even if you've got foot-warmers on your machine, only a teenage boy would be careless enough to go riding like that. I knew you liked to drink, but I didn't think you were the kind who'd get kids mixed up in bootlegging."

The man froze; the moon shone on his face, but only his head and upper body were outlined above the dark form of his machine. "Look, I don't know what you're accusing me of, and I'm not admitting anything here, I'm just stating an opinion. Most of these local kids are going to leave town someday. Maybe for good, maybe just to go to school, but they're going to leave. Then they'll have to cope with the real world—and liquor is part of that world. If they haven't learned to handle it, they'll be in big trouble. Look at you, Charlie. No offense, but if you'd learned how to handle it when you were younger, you'd have been fine."

"Yeah. Johnnie Lee learned, didn't he, Al?"

"Goddamn it!" Briggs said. "I'm sure tired of hearing how downtrodden you people are every time some Eskimo drinks himself to death. This country

is founded on individual rights, and the last time I looked at the map, Nuyaqpalik was still part of the U.S. of A. If a few kids got to celebrating and one of them drank too much, don't go blaming somebody else."

"That's not the way I heard it." Karuk still made no move to get off the snowmachine.

"No, no, sorry, Charlie. These boys you mentioned, who've supposedly been helping the bootleggers—I'd think if that was true they'd be prepared for getting picked up and questioned. They would have been told just to demand a lawyer. These hypothetical boys wouldn't say anything."

"I didn't hear it from them." Karuk waited. The white man shifted on his feet. He didn't want to say anything more now, but Karuk thought he would. Finally he did.

"All right, we don't need to play games. So who said different?"

"Johnnie Lee."

Briggs's shock was visible in the moonlight. It must have been the one thing he couldn't have been sure of—whether Johnnie had talked to anyone before he died.

"When you and those boys were coming back from your pickup the other night," Karuk continued, "you probably weren't sure how far behind I'd be. You

knew I might be able to radio ahead to have someone watch for you coming into town. So you had to hide the booze before you got there."

"You've got some imagination."

"By the time you finished and made it to the rear of your store, it must have been around seven or seven thirty in the morning. Some of the boys must have been excited at almost getting caught, and you were probably yelling, too. And then another boy happened to walk by, cutting through the alley on his way to school. A boy who never did a damn thing wrong in his life but just happened to be in the wrong place.

"There's just one thing I really want to know, Al. Did you just tell them to go get him drunk that night and find out how much he heard—and they got carried away pouring that vodka down his throat? Or did you mean to kill him that way so he couldn't talk? Would you really take a life just to get away with your bootlegging?"

Briggs laughed up at the smeared and shimmering stars. He steadied himself with his left hand on the shovel handle; his right was in his pocket. Karuk could hear a rushing in the distance like the wind, though the air remained still. He took off his right outer mitt and the inner glove and laid

them across the handlebars. Then he put his own hand in his parka pocket.

"Okay, Charlie, let's stop the fantasy crap. We both know I'm no bootlegger, and I'd never have a kid killed. But let's say you were to search me and you found a bottle or two. I'm not the only one in town. So I'd turn it over and pay my fine and promise not to do it any more."

"I'm not talking misdemeanor possession, Al. Either way it's likely to work out to some degree of murder. Or felony murder."

"All you've got on me is two bottles, Charlie."

He could feel it gathering now, rushing from out of the low tundra hills all around, from out of the depths of the pack ice behind.

"And a bunch of cases right under your feet. You couldn't leave the trail to hide them because I'd have seen the tracks. So you buried them *under* the trail—dug a hole next to this tussock, piled snow on top of the booze, then rode over it a few times with your machines so it just looked like someone had gotten stuck here. Once you dig it all up, Joey and the other boys will talk all night. If they don't, their lawyers will tell them to do it tomorrow."

Briggs shifted again, turned slightly. "You know, if those

troopers can't find the booze, they'll have to let the boys go."

When he was twelve and the bear had come at him, Karuk had felt no urge to run, no fear, only the sense of an inevitability so vast it reduced all human will to nothing. A seal broke surface and blew when the bear was fifteen feet away. The bear skidded to a stop, claws digging at the ice, swung its head to look at the seal. Karuk slid a little forty grain bullet in through its right ear, and the bear collapsed without a sound.

"Get your hand out of your pocket, Al."

It was rushing in from all sides. Karuk had the taste of that old .22 in his mouth. He waited. For Briggs to take his hand out of his pocket.

Flame spouted from Briggs's extended arm, and Karuk was standing astraddle the snowmachine, Glock in his hand, and the roaring filled his ears.

He led the three machines in with his headlamp, then waited, watching one of the troopers get off on the wrong side and flounder into the waist-deep snow. Standing up on their machines, the other trooper and Nick both shone their flashlights around on the snow.

"So where's the booze?" the second trooper asked.

"I figure we dig just about where he's lying," Charlie said.

The other trooper had climbed back over and gotten off on the firmer snow on the trail. Through the spiderwebbed windshield Charlie saw him walk up to Briggs.

"Looks like you drilled him right in the forehead."

"What was he packing?" the trooper on the machine asked.

The one in the trail knelt and unclenched Briggs's right hand. "Walther PPK. Pipsqueak James Bond gun."

"Wouldn't carry one myself." The trooper still on his machine lit a cigarette and nodded at Charlie's windshield. "No penetration. Looks like his bullet just deflected off the Plexiglas."

The one in the trail was checking the angle. "What happened, chief? You must have stood up and shot over the windshield, huh?"

"I . . . guess so. I'm not sure I can remember."

The trooper nodded. "I've heard it can be like that. Well, there will have to be an inquiry, but it sure looks like a justifiable shoot to me. One thing they might ask about—if you don't mind my saying so, it doesn't look real smart—is your coming after him all by yourself like this. He might have killed



you and stuffed you in a snow-bank out here."

"I didn't know for sure he'd be coming out tonight. Besides, there was something I needed to know."

"Yeah, and how would *we*

have ever known what happened if he'd killed you?"

"Oh," Charlie said, "my ghost would have shown you."

The troopers looked at him, then smiled. Nick knew better.

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# THE CASE OF THE SILENT KIDNAPPER AND THE SEVENTY PERCENT SOLUTION

James A. Noble



**“W**hat’s the panic?” asked Detective Sergeant Mark Murphy, sticking his head through the open doorway.

“Mark! Thank heavens,” replied Captain Evert, visibly relieved. “Come in. We have a

genuine emergency on our hands.”

Mark entered and closed the door. “What’s wrong?”

“We picked up the kidnapper on the Scotswater case. We had to. When we realized he wasn’t leading us to the boy after he

took the ransom, we had no choice."

The detective looked concerned. "He may have been planning to release the boy through an accomplice. I'm not sure..."

"Mark," interrupted Evert. "The kidnapper was Jack Fritz."

Mark's concern increased. "Fritz. He always works alone. Hardened criminal who hates cops and trusts no one. That's bad."

"It gets worse," said the captain in a shaky voice. He got up and started pacing next to his desk. "Fritz has buried the Scotswater boy alive in a large shipping crate somewhere south of here. He wants his freedom and complete immunity from prosecution in exchange for the location of the hiding place."

"That's not going to happen," said Mark.

"Believe it or not, I was so desperate to get the boy out of there, I actually called the governor and federal authorities, but they were adamant. No deal."

Mark let out a deep sigh. "How much air?"

"Fritz claims that a battery powering a ventilation fan that pulls air from the surface has probably gone dead already. If so, the boy has only hours left."

"Can you reason with him? Have you explained the effect a

potential murder charge will have on his sentence?"

The captain ran a nervous hand over his hair. "No dice. Fritz says he can't face going back to prison. He claims it's an all-or-nothing proposition as far as he's concerned. That was the last thing he said. Now he's not talking to anyone. He's gone completely silent."

Evert suddenly whirled and struck the wall hard with his fist. Mark grimaced.

"Forget that, John," said Mark. "You know as well as I do that that won't work on a man like Jack Fritz."

Captain Evert collapsed in his chair, shaking his head. It was one of the few times he had ever heard his young detective call him by his first name.

"For heaven's sake, Mark. Think of something. Use that marvelous brain of yours."

Mark was silent for several seconds. "It will be risky," he said finally.

"I don't care. Will it work?"

"I'd say we have about a seven in ten chance of success. I'll have to bend the rules a little."

"Put a crease in them if you must," responded the captain. "You have a green light. What do you need?"

"Your van keys and your glasses for starters."

The keys and Evert's spare



glasses hit the desktop in response.

"I'll need Bryan Scotswater."

"The boy's father? I can't expose him to any danger, you know," Evert said.

"He'll be safe enough. Get him down here and have him wait for me. I also want Officers Gary Burk and Gale Watts."

Evert pulled his schedule from his top drawer. "Watts is on patrol. Burk's here."

"Good. Get Gale on the radio and tell her to stop by a hardware store and buy a pick, a shovel, and a small can of white paint . . . Oh, and a small paintbrush like you use on trim. Also have her switch to her civvies as soon as she arrives. Burk, too."

Evert was madly jotting notes to himself on the back of the schedule sheet.

"I'll need about fifteen thousand dollars," added Mark cautiously.

"You know the paperwork hassle. That will take too long."

"Fritz had the ransom money on him when you caught him, didn't he? I only need a small part of it, and you'll get it all back."

"It's been checked . . ."

Mark cleared his throat loudly.

"It's been . . ." began Evert again.

Again Mark cleared his throat.

"I mean it *hasn't* been checked in yet," said Evert finally.

"That's what I thought you were going to say."

"Anything else?"

"Kelly."

Evert snorted. "What? You mean Kelly who runs the bar we go to?"

"The same."

"Why do you need *him*?"

"He looks a little like John Fritz?" suggested Mark, a slight smile on his face for the first time since he'd entered the office.

"Ah, come on, Mark. Kelly is two inches shorter and thirty pounds heavier than Fritz. Except for the dark wavy hair and that mustache, they don't look anything alike."

Mark rose and headed for the door. "He's as close as we can come considering the time we have. Besides, the height and weight difference isn't as noticeable when one is lying down."

"Excuse me?"

"I've got to go down to the holding cells. If you get some strange phone calls from the officers of your various departments, you're going to back me up, right?"

"Of course, but what's Kelly supposed . . ."

It was too late. The detective was gone.

For the next half hour Captain Evert answered the phone



and told each caller to go along with anything Mark wanted. He did so without even finding out what the detective had requested. In a desperate situation, he knew he could trust Mark. And this was a desperate situation indeed.

Two hours later Captain Evert got the phone call he really wanted. It was Mark. The Scotswater boy had been found, semiconscious but alive. He would be all right after a night at the hospital. Evert asked the obvious question.

"How'd you do it?"

"I'm at Kelly's," replied Mark over the din of a crowd. "Come on down. Everyone is waiting for you."

"And bring plenty of money," yelled Kelly's familiar voice in the background.

The thought of buying a round for an entire bar full of people didn't bother the captain as much as did the idea of paying for Kelly's drink at Kelly's bar. That plus the riddle of how Mark had pulled off the recovery of the Scotswater boy was rolling around in his brain when he entered Kelly's to the cheers of the crowd. The first man to greet him was Bryan Scotswater.

"I can't stay. I've left my wife at the hospital with our son. He's completely recovered," he

said shaking Evert's hand. "I just had to stop by and thank everyone in your department for saving my little boy's life. I really must get back to the hospital before he drives any more nurses and doctors crazy. Thank you so much."

After Scotswater left, the next sight to capture the captain's eye was a grinning Kelly standing behind the bar. He was wearing an oversized bright orange prisoner's jumpsuit and Evert's spare glasses. He looked ridiculous.

"I'm not even going to ask," he said, taking his glasses from the bartender. Spotting Mark at the far end of the bar, he made his way toward him amid backslaps and congratulations. An empty barstool and a chilled draft beer were waiting for him.

"I don't know how you did it, but my hat's off to you."

"Actually it wasn't me so much as Bryan Scotswater and Kelly," said Mark. "They were the keys to the whole scam."

"Scam? You scammed Fritz?"

"It wasn't easy. Any one of a hundred things could have gone wrong at any moment, but everyone played their parts well and Fritz led us straight to the boy."

"This I've got to hear," said Evert, finally relaxing.

"As you know, and as I pointed out earlier," began Mark,



"Fritz hates cops and trusts no one. If we had let him go, he would have expected a trap. He would never have led us to the boy. Remember, he took the money and ran the first time.

"What I had to do was produce a convincing way of allowing him to escape without arousing his suspicion that we were in on it. I also had to give him a strong motivation for getting to the boy. Bryan Scotswater provided me with a perfect opportunity to do both.

"As I instructed him, Scotswater asked to see Fritz in the prisoners' visiting area downstairs. Since they were separated by a wall and screen, I didn't think he would be in any danger.

"When the two met, Scotswater whispered an offer to Fritz. He told him he had arranged for Fritz to escape from jail if he would free his son."

Evert nodded. "That would have definitely interested our kidnapper. Fritz can't stand being locked up. How did you arrange a convincing escape?"

"I'll get to that next," said Mark. "But just getting him out wasn't enough. I had to be sure he would go for the boy. Again Bryan Scotswater provided the incentive.

"He explained that once he was free, Fritz would find a van parked outside our building with the keys in it. Also inside

would be a pick, a shovel, and fifteen thousand dollars in cash."

"You gave that maniac the keys to my van? He didn't damage it, did he? Why *my* van?" asked an excited Evert.

"I had to have a full-sized van," said Mark. "Yours was the only one I could come up with on the spur of the moment. And no, he didn't damage it."

Evert breathed a sigh of relief, but he was still a bit peeved at the detective. "Didn't you think Fritz would be smart enough to check for hidden policemen or tracking bugs?"

"I'm sure he did. I couldn't take the chance of using either. That's why I had to have a full-sized van like yours."

"I don't follow you."

"I'll . . ."

"I know, you'll explain shortly. Get on with it."

Scotswater told Fritz that all he had to do to get another hundred thousand dollars was to ask his son the location of the cabin where he spent his summer vacation last year. The place the boy would tell him about would also be the spot where Bryan had already placed the additional money. Scotswater even told Fritz he could take his son with him as hostage.

"Scotswater kept repeating that all he was interested in was getting his son back and he did-





# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

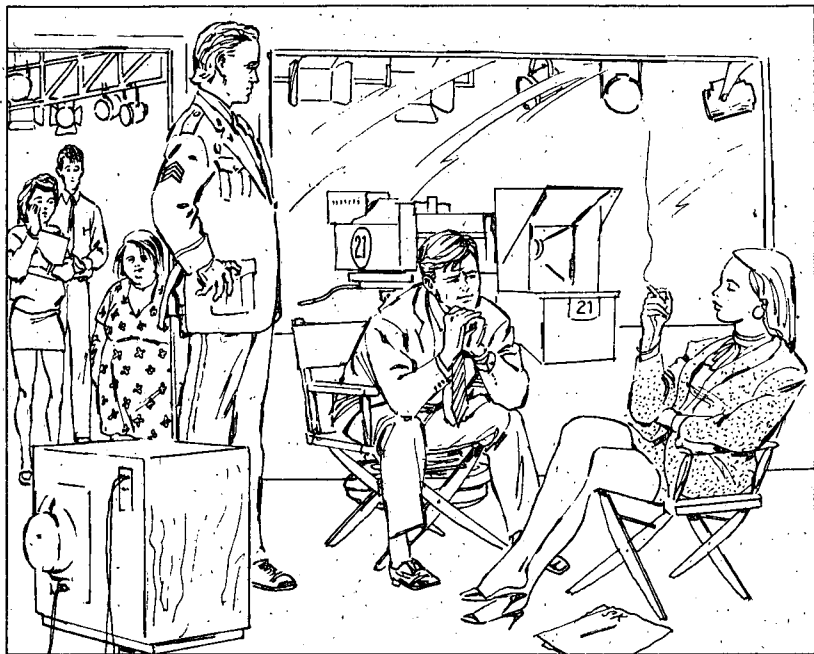


*Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.*

A shadow of his former self. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



# True Story

## B. K. Stevens

Dear Mother,

I'm sorry your neighbors are giving you a hard time about that show. Oh sure, I understand why they're so worked up—seeing a murder happen live on television, and seeing your

son smack in the middle. But I gotta say it makes me sick the way everybody keeps talking about this thing, the way new rumors get started every day. Believe me, most of them are pure garbage. Let me tell you

what really happened. Then you can tell your neighbors, and then maybe they'll leave you alone.

It started when the captain told Bolt and me that this syndicated talk show, *True Story*, would be visiting our city, broadcasting from the Civic Coliseum—it was touring the Midwest doing live shows as a publicity stunt. Anyway, the director wanted Bolt and me to be on the first show. See, one segment was about a case we'd solved, and the director wanted to introduce us from the audience. Well, I'd never watched the show, but taking a bow on TV sounded like fun. Bolt didn't like the idea. He'd read an article, he said, and had "reservations about the show's character and influence"—that's how he put it. But the captain makes the decisions, and he thought it'd be good P.R. for the department, so we were going.

(By the way, Mother, Bolt's sort of droopy. You two didn't have an argument on that trip to Zaire, did you? He won't say, and I guess I don't really expect you to, either—you two have got to be the most closemouthed people I know. Anyhow, if you had a falling out, I hope you make up soon. I've still got my heart set on having Bolt for a stepfather someday.)

The big night came. Ellen and

Kevin stayed home—Kevin was wild to go, but Ellen had read an article, too, and she didn't think the show was right for a kid Kevin's age. So Bolt and I headed for the coliseum at seven. We went to a back entrance and worked our way through a good-sized crowd, mostly folks in their twenties hanging around hoping to glimpse a star. A mousy-looking guy was waiting, gripping a clipboard and pacing.

"Lieutenant Walter Johnson?" he said. "Sergeant Gordon Bolt? Thank God. We're live in two hours. Follow me, please."

He led us backstage to the show's temporary office. Three people were clustered near a central desk. There was a shortish redhaired woman of twenty-five or so, very pretty and animated, wearing an almost-mini skirt and a fuzzy-type, tightish sweater, just oozing perkiness. There was another woman, too, maybe ten years older and much more sophisticated—tall, slender, with sculpted blonde hair and a classy grey suit that'd obviously never been near a rack. She was cradling a telephone receiver between chin and shoulder, flipping through a thick typescript, nodding as she listened to a man who looked vaguely familiar.

"It doesn't blend," he was saying, all tired and whiny. "I *tried* that new blush, P. T., and it

does *not* blend with my foundation. Really, I wish you'd talk to Maria."

"I've fired her already," the blonde woman said curtly. "She tried selling me some line about how hard it is to find decent blushes in the Midwest, but I wasn't buying. Here." She opened her purse and tossed a container at him. "Backup blush in your shade—I always carry some. Well, Marci?"

"Pimientos." The perky woman's voice was nearly tragic. "The lunch buffet *and* the dinner buffet—olives, but no pimientos."

"Damn!" The blonde woman turned sharply on the young man who'd led us in. "Lucas, I *told* you to check on that. Call the caterers *now* and ask them what the hell's the deal with the olives. If those bozos can't scrape up pimientos by nine fifteen, they're history." She noticed us and frowned. "Who are they?"

"Cops," Lucas said, gulping. "For the second segment. I—"

"Of course." She thrust the receiver at the young man, then clutched my hand. "Lieutenant Johnson—thank God. I'm P. T. Julian, *True Story's* producer and director. I read the *People* article on the Martin case, and the *minute* I saw your picture I thought, if I ever have a problem, *that's* the cop I'd want to

help me. And now I *do* have a problem, and here you are."

I smiled awkwardly. You read that article, Mother, the one giving me the credit for solving the Martin case—and why not? Everyone else gave me the credit, too, even Bolt. Only problem is, I literally didn't have a clue about that case until Bolt shoved the solution in my face. He has that way of taking all my dumb remarks, transforming them into brilliant insights, and weaving them into a flawless interpretation of the crime. Then he tells everyone how lucky he is to work with such a great detective, I get a raise, and *People's* begging for an interview. You know how often I've tried to confess the truth to him, how utterly I've failed. And you know how lousy it makes me feel.

So I smiled awkwardly. "We're glad to help, Ms. Julian," I said. "Now, if you'll just show us where to sit—"

"In a minute." She drew me aside. "We've got—well, a situation, and I'm not sure our security people can manage it. I haven't told Marci or Vic—I don't want to upset them before a live show—but we need a *real* policeman. I'll tell you about it later. For now, meet our stars." She took my arm and led me to the man. "This is our host, Vic Vecchio—one of the greats."

Now I knew why he'd looked

familiar. "Hey, Vic Vecchio," I said, pumping his hand. "I used to watch you all the time on that game show—what was it called?"

"Well, there was *Take Your Chances*," he said, smiling. "Or that may have been before your time. Was it *Stumpers*?"

"Yeah, *Stumpers*," I said. "What a great show." You remember that one, Mother—I loved it when I was Kevin's age. I hadn't realized Vic Vecchio was still around. He looked about the same: waist a little softer but hair as black as ever, and his face—well, it had a stretched-out, smoothed-over look, like maybe he'd had it worked on, but he still looked great.

"So, you're already a fan of Vic's," P. T. said, and pointed me to the perky young woman. "Soon, I'm sure, you'll be a fan of Marci's, too. This is our co-hostess, Marci Anthony."

She shook my hand but pretended to pout. "You mean you're not a fan now? You don't watch our show?"

"I haven't had a chance to catch it," I said, blushing. "Police officers work such long hours, and—"

"It's okay," Marci said, patting my hand. "Anyway, you'll love it. It's great—*Ricki Lake* meets *People's Court* meets *America's Most Wanted* meets *Wheel of Fortune*. We've got penetrating

dialogue about relationships, exciting reenactments, audience participation, spectacle, fabulous prizes—everything a talk show *should* have. And it's all P. T.'s brainchild."

P. T. shrugged graciously. "Oh well. Now, if you'll excuse us—Lucas! Show the officers to their seats."

We said goodbye and followed Lucas—he was the young man who'd first met us, obviously what you'd call a gofer. As soon as he got us seated in the front row, he took off backstage.

As for the stage itself—that was something. Huge lights and lots of cameras, naturally, plus a big, fancy desk and a bunch of chairs in the middle of the stage, and some elaborate sets off to the sides: a living room setup, a kitchen, and a curtained-off area. Bolt and I speculated about what the sets might be for as we watched people in overalls rush around checking things. So far we were the only ones in the audience—we could hear talking and laughing outside the big doors at the rear of the coliseum, but the security guards weren't letting anyone else in just yet.

P. T.'s voice boomed over a loudspeaker, and I realized she was up in the control booth. "Pia!" she called. "Prop check!"

A slim, young-looking woman with waist-length brown hair

sauntered to the middle of the stage, put her hands on her hips, and glared up at the booth. "Yeah," she said.

"Okay," P. T.'s voice replied. "Now, as I call things out, hold them up. First, desk area. Vic's mug? Marci's? Mystery Box? Is the key inside? Let me see it. Okay. Knife in bag?"

The young woman held up a plastic evidence bag containing a hunting knife, and I nudged Bolt, starting to get excited. My case, reenacted for millions to see. It made me feel important, famous, like a real TV cop. "That's the knife Gladys stabbed Leo with," I said. "Some crime, huh?"

"Indeed, sir," Bolt said grimly. "Tastelessly exploiting human misery and degradation merely to titillate jaded thrill-seekers—good heavens! It is, as you say, *some* crime, a crime of calculation and profit, far worse than the crime of passion we investigated that sorry night."

"Yeah, right," I said, "some crime." I sank down in my seat, trying to act like that's what I'd meant.

"Okay," P. T. was saying. "Move to the kitchen set. Gin bottle? Pizza cartons? Knife with retractable blade? Teddy bear? Okay. Living room next."

The young woman didn't even look at the beer cans and throw pillows as she lifted them up,

just kept her eyes glued resentfully on the control booth. Twice she dropped props; three times props weren't where they were supposed to be, and stagehands had to scurry to find them. Finally the check was over, and P. T. told security to let the audience in. It was a young crowd, noisy and happy, some already clapping rhythmically. Then dramatic-sounding recorded music started, and P. T.'s voice boomed over the loudspeaker again.

"Hey, guys!" she cried, sounding much peppier than she had backstage. "It's almost showtime! But first, here's a special person, one who knows how special *you* really are. She's *True Story's* sweetheart—she's *your* true friend—she's MARCI ANTHONY!"

Marci bounded on stage, and people went nuts—clapping their hands raw, cheering themselves hoarse, screaming, "I love you, Marci!" and "Go, girl, go!" Marci smiled and waved, giving them time to enjoy themselves. Then she gestured for quiet and went into her spiel, thanking them for making her feel welcome, making offhand comments that sounded risqué but really weren't, blushing sweetly when people hooted anyway. Then she said she'd introduce the *real* star; there was a recorded drumroll; and Vic Vecchio

walked out to a very nice round of applause. He bowed, smiled, disappeared backstage. Marci descended into the audience, flirting with men and hugging women before returning to the stage to point out the applause signs and explain about station breaks. She dropped a little curtsy, blew a little kiss, and ran off, and the place went nuts again. The warmup was over.

Time for the show. Overallled people rushed around, lights dimmed, someone stage-whispered a countdown, dramatic music blared, and P. T.'s voice rang out, introducing Vic and Marci. They ran out, smiled and waved again, then sat at the big desk and chatted for one minute flat about how great it was to be in the Midwest and what a thrill it was to broadcast live.

Then Marci smirked. "Well, Vic, let's meet our first guests. They're residents of this fair city—and if you thought only New Yorkers had problems, you were *wrong*. Let's meet the Galles—Elaine, Ed, and their son, Bill. Bill gave us the title for this segment—'Mom, Get Serious! It's Time to Throw Dad Out!'"

The audience shrieked with delight, bouncy music played, and the Galles shuffled onstage—a middle-aged man with a bulging belly, a middle-aged woman with lacquered hair, a

teenage boy with a nose ring. Mother, I squirm when I think of what happened next. The three of them sat down in the comfy chairs next to the desk and just lit into each other. The son complained about what a drunk and a slob the father was; the father barked back about what a moron his son was; and the mother chimed in, saying yeah, she knew her husband was a loser, but her son wasn't much better. Meanwhile the audience alternated between making shocked, sympathetic noises and screaming with laughter. Vic looked embarrassed, and Marci looked compassionate—but every once in a while she cracked an off-color joke and winked at the camera.

Time for the reenactment: Marci grabbed a microphone and ran into the audience, and Vic led the family to the living room set. Obliging, the husband plopped on the couch and picked up a remote control; the wife scattered beer cans to illustrate his piggishness; the son delivered a vicious monologue while Vic shook his head and Marci garnered audience comments advising the wife to throw out her husband, her son, or both. Mother, it was awful. I'd never watched a show like this—I'd never thought people would reveal their dirtiest se-



crets and expose their nearest relations just to be on TV. I felt ashamed.

It got worse. The mother still seemed undecided about the divorce, so Marci urged, "Bill, don't you have more to tell your mother? Should Vic open the Mystery Box?" Well, Bill agonized a bit, then said sure. Vic held up a spangled box, opened it, and dangled a motel key in front of the cameras. The curtains on the side area opened, and there was a slightly hefty bimbo in black lingerie, sprawling and smiling on an oversized bed. The audience screamed in indignant glee. The family fell to it again—the son accusing, the mother recoiling, the father grinning and confessing. Yes, this was his girlfriend. Yes, they did shack up together now and again—but hey, so what?

Women jumped to their feet, shaking fists, screaming threats. Marci shouted it was time for the Judgment Machine, the audience roared agreement, and two skinny, sequined women rolled out an oversized applause meter. Vic wiped his brow.

"Audience!" he shouted. "*You* decide! Is Bill just making trouble? Or is his father a lowlife who *deserves* to be booted out? Who's the dirty liar, and who's telling the TRUE STORY?"

They didn't really need the

Judgment Machine. Dad got boos and curses; Bill got cheers. So Vic and the sequined lovelies gave Bill a motorcycle and his mother a set of luggage, then led Dad to a curtained-off area. Gamely Dad put on a yellow slicker and stepped behind the curtain. Vic faced the cameras.

"Our audience thinks you're a dirty liar, Ed," he said, his voice low and serious. "Let's show you just what they mean."

The curtains snapped open, and there stood Ed in his slicker, grinning. Vic pulled a cord, and mud cascaded down from a tank overhead. The audience went wild again, Vic shook his head in mock sadness, Marci giggled, Bill and his mom hugged. Recorded music flooded the coliseum, and the segment was over.

"Station break!" P. T. shouted, and a dozen people rushed onstage, armed with mops and powder puffs. Over the confusion, P. T. yelled at cameramen, telling them to check this angle, that angle, and the young stagehand called Pia slumped about, yawning as she cleared away used props. Despite the yelling and running, everything went smoothly until Mrs. Galle stalked back onstage and cursed at Vic and Marci, shaking her fist. She wasn't satisfied with the luggage—she wanted to go to Disneyland. The audi-

ence started hooting. Vic looked scared.

Marci looked up at the control booth. "P. T.!" she shouted. "Can you come down and deal with this, please?"

"Not now," P. T. called back. "I still have angles to check. Lucas! Lucas! Damn it, where is that boy?"

The gofer ran in, flushed. P. T. ordered him to get rid of Mrs. Galle, and he tried but he wasn't right for the job—Mrs. Galle kneed his groin steadily until he promised to pay for the Disneyland trip himself. The audience loved it. Everyone was in a great mood by the time the next segment started.

Again the dimmed lights, the whispered countdown, the music, the camera tight on Marci. "Okay, Vic," she said, "let's meet our next guests. She just got out of prison after serving five years for assaulting him with a deadly weapon. But he says—and this is the title of our next segment—'Yeah, You Tried to Kill Me—but Baby, I Want You Back!' Vic, meet Gladys and Leo!"

They walked out—both large, both tattooed, both hairy—and I remembered the first time I'd seen them. The neighbors called 911 when they heard the screams, and Bolt and I burst into the kitchen to see Leo lying on the floor and Gladys standing over him, the knife in her hand

still dripping blood. I didn't need much help from Bolt to solve *that* case—within ten minutes I'd figured out which one to arrest. I still feel proud.

Well, they sat down to chat with Vic and Marci, saying how they'd lived together for several years, how she'd gotten jealous, how they'd gotten drunk and started arguing, how she'd picked up his hunting knife and stabbed him in the stomach. They quibbled about some details—she said she'd stabbed him in self-defense because he was strangling her, he said he'd just been massaging her neck to calm her down—but they agreed on the basics. Marci introduced Bolt and me as the courageous officers who'd saved Leo, we took our bow, and they got down to business.

The problem was, now that Gladys was out of prison, Leo wanted her back. Yeah, she'd stabbed him, but he didn't scare off that easy, not when it came to a fine woman like Gladys. And he *had* been sleeping with her sister, so maybe he'd deserved to get cut. At this point the curtains in a side area parted, and there was Gladys's extravagantly overweight sister in a purple nightie lounging on that same oversized bed. She'd been keeping Leo company while Gladys was in prison, she said, and she'd be glad to go

right on if Gladys didn't take him back now. Gladys swore at her, the sister swore back, the audience laughed, Leo grinned, Vic blushed. Marci nodded compassionately, then winked.

Now it was Gladys's turn to tell her story. Sure, she loved Leo, pretty much, but he let her go to prison. If he'd said he was strangling her, she'd have been acquitted. Yeah, maybe he'd have done a few years—but if he loved her, he should be willing to do time for her. Still, if the audience thought she should go back to him, she would. If not, he could have her sister, and they could both rot in hell.

Marci gazed intently at the camera. "Audience, it's up to you. Should Gladys take Leo back, or should he keep sleeping with her sister? But first, let's get the TRUE STORY about that fateful night. We'll start with Gladys's side. Ready, Vic?"

"Ready!"

As the audience hooted, Vic stripped to his undershirt, then led Gladys to the kitchen set. Marci winked and held up the evidence bag. "This is the actual knife Gladys used to stab Leo," she said. "But even though we like to keep these reenactments realistic, she'll use a different knife tonight. Gladys, show us how it happened."

"Okay." Gladys held up the gin bottle. "Well, we'd been

drinkin', and arguin'. He shoved me, and maybe I shoved back."

Vic brushed a finger against her. She shoved back with spirit, getting into the role. The audience roared in approval.

Gladys was starting to look flushed. "Then I called him a bastard or something," she said, "and he called me a fat pig or—"

"You fat pig!" Vic yelled, and the audience clapped madly.

Gladys's eyes narrowed. She hadn't liked that. And she hadn't liked it when Leo slept with her sister. "Then the creep put his hands around my throat," she said.

Vic demonstrated gently. The audience chanted, "Do it! Do it!" Gladys seemed in a trance of remembered fury and sudden celebrity. "So I picked up the knife," she said, grabbing it, "and I let him have it, just like—this!"

Something was wrong. I'd loved Vic Vecchio on *Stumpers*, but even as a kid I'd known I liked him mostly because he seemed nice, not because he was all that talented. But the look of stunned pain that sprang across his face—Mother, Olivier couldn't have managed it, not on his best night. And the blood—I know special effects are pretty good now, but I've seen plenty of real blood in my day, too, and this sure looked real to me.

Vic Vecchio slumped to the



floor, clutching the knife in his stomach. Gladys, puzzled, stared at her bloody hand. The audience cheered and stamped its feet. Already Bolt had leapt onto the stage. I was ten seconds behind him.

I rolled Vic Vecchio over, took one look at his pasty face, and panicked. "Call 911!" I shouted. "Get an ambulance!"

Now some people in the audience quieted, getting to their feet, straining for a better look. Security guards ran forward. Bolt had both hands over the wound, applying pressure. Marci Anthony stood up at the desk. "Vic?" she said uncertainly.

Vic Vecchio looked up, his face vibrating with pain, and clutched my hand. "So," he gasped, "you really liked *Stumpers*?"

"Yes, sir," I said, choking up. "It was a good show."

"A great show." He labored to lift his voice. "P. T.," he called, "check the lighting!" And he died.

A million people rushed around—security guards, cops, paramedics. And then I was in the backstage office with Bolt hovering over me while Lucas, the gofer, gave me coffee and cried.

I glanced at a monitor. Marci stood alone on the stage, sobbing but articulate. Doctors, she said, had confirmed that Vic

Vecchio, the man she so cared about, the man who gave her her start in show business, was dead. She didn't yet know how it had happened. But she'd find out. And she'd make sure all Vic's loyal fans found out, too. She'd give them the *True Story*.

Cut. In another minute, Marci was backstage, P. T. was comforting her surviving star, the stagehand called Pia was bawling loudly, and Leo and Gladys and her sister were huddled together in a surly mass. Bolt patted my shoulder.

"My sympathy, sir," he said. "A cherished television companion of your boyhood—the poignancy must be acute. But you must gather your strength and take charge. Justice demands it."

Bolt was right. At least he was right in thinking I had to *seem* to take charge so he could *really* take charge. I squared my shoulders and walked over to Gladys. She'd thought, she said, that she was only pretending to stab Vic Vecchio, that she was using a knife with a retractable blade. They'd rehearsed it that afternoon, she'd lustily plunged the fake knife against his stomach, he'd advised her to plunge even more lustily for the show, to make it look more real. She'd been more surprised than anyone else when she felt the knife rip through him.

She was telling the truth. I felt sure of it. I glanced at Bolt. He was nodding, so I knew it. I sent her home. Leo and her sister left with her, arms all linked together.

I glanced after them and shivered. I mean, I'm a cop, I've seen plenty, but this shocked me. Leo loved Gladys, but he was sleeping with her sister—and basically they were all getting along. It was wrong. It was damn near incestuous. I turned to Bolt, acting more sophisticated than I felt. "Well," I said, "I guess it's all in the family."

He nodded again. "All in the family indeed. Or, as the phrase goes, an inside job. I agree. The perpetrator had to be someone who works on the show, who knew about the reenactment and would have an opportunity to switch the knives. At least I *assume* the knives were switched. Shall we make sure, sir?"

Well, that made sense, though I hadn't thought of it on my own. The lab team had arrived, so we had them check both knives. The results were what you'd expect: The knife in the evidence bag had a retractable blade, and the knife that killed Vic had a real one. So someone must've made a switch before the show—or maybe during that station break when everyone was running around like crazy.

And it pretty much had to be intentional: If the knives were in the right spots for the rehearsal, how could they change places accidentally? We left the lab team to check for fingerprints and went backstage to talk with cast and crew.

By now spirits had rallied. P. T. held out an envelope. "It was a crazed fan," she said. "Damn! I should have known!"

I took the envelope. No address, no stamp. Inside, one sheet of paper, with a message composed from cut-out letters:

MARCI, YOU SLUT—LEAVE VIC ALONE, OR ELSE. I HATE THE WAY YOU FLIRT WITH HIM, RIGHT ON THE AIR. IF YOU KEEP IT UP I'LL GET YOU, OR I'LL GET HIM, YOU BET. IF I CAN'T HAVE HIM, NOBODY CAN.—A FREIND

Wow. Talk about a great clue. I noted the lack of address and stamp and deduced that the letter had not come through the mail. "Where did you find this?" I asked.

"On my desk," P. T. said, "when I got back from the lunch buffet. You were with me, Lucas—you saw. Some crazed fan must've sneaked in. Security's so loose here, all kinds of people running all around: car salesmen, 4-H people, Boy Scouts, lu-

natics: And one of them left this note and switched the knives and killed Vic. Damn!"

"Maybe," I said, remembering what Bolt had said about an inside job. "But maybe the murderer wasn't some wandering lunatic or Boy Scout. Maybe it was someone closer to home."

"Closer to home!" Marci echoed. "You *can't* think one of us wrote that note! You can't think one of us killed Vic!"

Bolt was studying the threatening letter. "Look, sir," he said, motioning me over. "Newsprint letters—mostly large—garish fonts not normally found in more respectable periodicals. I'd say these letters were cut from tabloids."

"Tabloids, eh?" I said, and turned sharply on P. T. "Any of your people read that kind of trash?"

She stared me down. "I wouldn't know. But if you pursue this absurd theory that one of us might be the killer, I insist you give us every chance to prove our innocence. I won't have that shadow hanging over the show. I insist you conduct an immediate search of the coliseum, of any spot to which we have access. I want you to be able to tell the press that you found absolutely no evidence linking any of us to this crime."

Well, I didn't know what evidence we could possibly find—

mutilated tabloids, maybe, but the notewriter would have to be pretty dumb to leave those lying around. Still, a search is generally a good idea. I wished I'd thought of it. I assigned six uniforms to it, decided I should question folks separately, and headed for Marci Anthony's dressing room with Marci and Bolt.

The first order of business was to find out what her relationship with Vic had been. The notewriter had said she flirted with him on the air, so maybe we had a romantic triangle going. It was hard to picture Marci Anthony as a killer—I've met lots of killers, and not one was that perky—but cops have to consider every angle, and lovers *have* been known to take knives to each other. I mean, Gladys stabbed Leo, didn't she?

I eased into the topic gently. "You must be broken up about this," I remarked. "Owing Vic Vecchio so much and all, I mean. At the end of the show, you said he gave you your start in show business. He discovered you, did he?"

She tilted her head to the side prettily and rolled her eyes upward. She'd used that move on the show; it meant she was thinking things over. "It wasn't Vic *personally*," she said. "I was doing a talk show in Baltimore, and I sent in a tape when I



heard *True Story* was adding a hostess and changing its format."

"Changing its format? How do you mean?"

She gave me a wink—a knowing, confidential, skillful wink. "*True Story* was just a regular talk show before P. T. took over—minor-league celebrities, cooking segments, 'You and Your Pet,' all that. Vic was hosting alone, and ratings stunk. P. T. had a new concept. She saw my tape and wanted me to be part of it."

"But I'm sure Mr. Vecchio helped with the decision." Now that I thought about it, I remembered he'd had a reputation for running around with younger women. "He was divorced, wasn't he?"

She arched an eyebrow—sad, wise, just short of cynical. "Five times. The last marriage ended months before I met him."

"And you two—well, you got along pretty well, right?"

"Sure." She sighed a heart-full, measured sigh. She'd sighed that exact same sigh on the show when Leo confessed to sleeping with Gladys's sister. "Look, I know that note implied something was going on between Vic and me, but it's not true. We flirted on-camera because P. T. thought sexual chemistry would help the show,

but off-camera we were just friends."

Sure, that's what she'd want me to think. That'd eliminate any possible motive for her. But I wasn't giving up so easily. "Come on, Ms. Anthony. A great-looking young woman like you—I can't believe he never even made a pass at you."

She turned away, sighed again, paced a few steps, then faced me, pressing one hand against her cheek—just lightly, so as not to disturb the make-up. "Look, I don't like pointing a finger, and I'm not saying she had anything to do with his death, but Vic had no interest in me. He was locked in a hot-and-heavy affair with a stage-hand—the young longhaired one, Pia."

Whew. That'd take Marci out of the running as a suspect—and put this Pia way out in front. Come to think of it, she would've had the easiest time switching the knives. She'd handled them just minutes before the show—I'd seen it, during the prop check. And she'd looked sulky then, and she'd cried like crazy later. The case snapped together: she'd been having an affair with Vic, she'd suspected him of cheating with Marci, she'd gotten angry and written the note, she'd gotten angrier and switched the knives, she'd felt sorry and

cried. It was almost like Leo and Gladys and her sister all over again.

I stood up, feeling dumb about not immediately seeing that Pia was the obvious suspect. And, I realized, I must've seemed pretty sexist, assuming that Marci got her job because Vic liked her looks, not because she was talented. I wanted to apologize but didn't know how. "Thanks for your help, Ms. Anthony. And I—well, I can see you're a first-class performer and a real independent type. And I wish you lots of luck with your show."

She looked at me sort of oddly. "Thank you," she said.

"An apt parting jab, sir," Bolt whispered as we walked back to the office area. "A first-class performer' indeed! All tears on-camera when she announced Mr. Vecchio's death, all calm and composed when she stepped backstage moments later! And her pretended reluctance to accuse the stagehand, when she paced just three steps before doing so—that was a performance, too."

My elbows went clammy. Had it started again? Had I totally misread an interrogation, and was Bolt unknowingly pulling me back on track by misreading a dumb remark I'd made about it? But Pia was still our best suspect, wasn't she? After all, she'd had an affair with Vic.

And Marci and P. T. could be a second pair of suspects, since they might've been attracted to him, too.

"A second pair—" I began confidently.

"I believe the expression is 'second banana,' not 'second pear,' sir," Bolt said respectfully. "But I see your point. As long as Vic Vecchio was the star, Ms. Anthony could be nothing but a second banana—and she is, as you remarked to her, 'a real independent type,' far *too* independent to relish being a supporting player for an aging has-been who couldn't garner ratings on his own. Now *True Story* is, as you put it, *'your show'*—Ms. Anthony's alone. *She* suffered no real loss tonight, felt no real grief. Your ironic reprimand was well-deserved."

Damn. He was right. I'd assumed that if Marci hadn't been in love with Vic she had no motive for killing him—but maybe she had another sort of motive. Well, that was the last hasty assumption I'd make in *this* case. When we questioned this Pia Whatever-her-last-name-was, I'd be a lot more cautious.

Her last name was Pomfret, and the uniforms were just finishing their search of the prop room when we went back there. They'd found nothing and moved on. Pia Pomfret sat hunched in a corner, looking

scared, resentful, and very, very young.

"I don't know why everyone's being so nasty," she said, not looking at us, pulling at a loose thread in her jeans. "I mean, everyone's acting like it was my fault just because I put out props and stuff. But I mean, like, gosh! I can't watch them every *second*. So if somebody messes with a prop while I'm not looking—I mean, like, gee! What am I supposed to do?"

I nodded sympathetically. Maybe she'd done a horrible thing, but maybe it *wasn't* really her fault. Maybe it was Vic Vecchio's fault for luring her into situations she wasn't ready to handle.

"How old are you, Ms. Pomfret?"

She looked up proudly. "Nineteen. And a half. I'm telling you the truth because you're cops—you'd find out anyway. But don't tell P. T. She thinks I'm twenty-two."

I nodded again. "Now, tell us about the routine you follow with the props. You set them out?"

"Yeah. And—well, I might as well tell you, I bought the fake knife for the reenactment. See, last week, when P. T. decided to do the Gladys-and-Leo segment, she gave me a picture of the hunting knife and told me to find an exact duplicate but with

a fake blade. And I mean, like, ouch! It's not easy, finding exact duplicates. I looked and *looked*, and finally I found one at Grebin's Theatrical Properties in Manhattan. Here. I've still got the receipt." She dug around in her huge beaded denim purse and pulled out a crumpled scrap.

"And this was an exact duplicate of the actual knife?"

"Pretty much. It had a brown handle, and the real knife had a black one, but I was sick of searching. So I smeared black Magic Marker on the handle, and it looked fine."

"I see. So when did you put the knives on the set?"

She yawned, already bored. "This morning. And the right ones were in the right places. At rehearsal, Gladys stabbed Vic with the fake knife, and it was *fine*. I mean, like, no problem."

"And at the final prop check, just before the show—" I sat forward—"were the right ones in the right places then?"

"Yeah." She looked up at the ceiling, squinted, then shrugged. "I mean, I *think* so. I mean, I didn't really, like, *look*. I mean, they were in the right places *before*, so why keep checking and *checking*? I mean, like, what for? Who *knew*?"

She smiled, proud she'd done such a good job of justifying her actions. I sighed. "So you can't

say whether the knives were switched before or after the prop check. Let's move on. Tell us about your relationship with Vic Vecchio."

Her eyes widened. "Well, he was, like, my boyfriend. I mean, we weren't, like, *living* together. But he paid my rent, and we had sex lots. I mean, *lots*. I mean, he was sorta old, but he wanted lots, and he bought me clothes and stuff, so fine. And he got me this job—this crummy, crummy job."

It was more of a confession than I'd expected. "And how long had this—this arrangement been going on?"

"Oh, *years*. I mean, like, maybe a year. See, I'd been in college, only it was really dull, really *hard*, so I dropped out after one semester and came to New York to be a model. I mean, I'm pretty, right, and thin? I *should* be a model. But I couldn't find a job. So one night, after I'd been looking and *looking* for jobs for a whole month almost, I met Vic at a bar—I have a fake I.D., it works great—and he says he's a talk-show host, and the show's changing its format, and it'll need a spokesmodel, and I can be it. So, fine. I took him home. Then it turns out they want a co-hostess, not a spokesmodel, so he gets me a stagehand job, and it's lousy, but at least it's *show business*, and he keeps

saying something better's coming. And I *believed* him!"

She spoke the last sentence with tremendous bitterness as though she'd obviously been deeply wronged, as though anyone hearing her story would immediately sympathize.

"And then?"

She sighed. "Then nothing. He kept paying the rent, so I kept being his girlfriend, kept doing this nowhere job. And that dumb Marci—I could do her job a *lot* better than her. I mean, I'm a *lot* thinner. Why should *she* be on camera and not *me*?"

Maybe it has something to do with talent, I thought, or brains. Sure, maybe in a perfect world Marci wouldn't be famous either, but at least she had smarts and drive. This Pia Pomfret didn't seem to have anything going for her but a medium-pretty face and easily slim hips, she'd dropped out of college after one semester and had probably never worked hard at anything, but she felt she was entitled to whatever she wanted. I lowered my voice. "Do you read tabloids, Ms. Pomfret?"

A look of alarm darted into her eyes. "No. I mean, yeah, sometimes. Doesn't everybody?"

"And what can you tell us about the note Ms. Julian found?"

Pia's jaw set. "Nothing. I mean, Lucas mentioned it at

dinner, but I didn't think anything of it. Why *should* I?"

I took a deep breath. "No reason—unless you sent it. Were you jealous of the way Marci flirted with Vic on the air?"

"No!" Now Pia looked indignant. "I mean, I knew it was all an act—and besides, I didn't even like him much. He was *old*. I mean, sure I was mad when he broke it off, but I—"

"He broke it off?" I cut in. "When?"

She realized she'd made a mistake and looked down. "A long time ago. Well, a while ago. Well, this morning. He said I was too young and his conscience was bothering him. And sure I was steamed, but I didn't get weepy. *He* got weepy, and he gave me a check for five thousand dollars—it's in my bag. So I said fine, and he blew his nose, and that was it. Why should I kill him?"

For one of the oldest reasons around, I thought sadly—a woman scorned, hell hath no fury, all that. Means, motive, opportunity—we had it all. I was just about to read her her rights when she started talking again.

"The one who *really* had a reason to hate Vic," she said peevishly, "is P. T. That bitch—always treating me like I'm dumb. Vic hated her, too. He wanted her fired—did you know?"

No, I didn't. I slipped my Miranda card back in my wallet.

"Well, it's true," Pia went on. "P. T. kept giving Marci more stuff to do, and Vic didn't like it one *bit*. And he had lots of friends at the syndication company, and he made lots of phone calls. And he started keeping a list of all the lousy things she did, and he had me carry it around. Here—it's in my bag."

She dug around in the denim bag, finally hauling out a small notebook. Five pages were filled with scrawled jottings about minor slights and insults—"didn't consult me about new paint for men's room," "gave Marci more lines in obese hookers segment."

"Is this Mr. Vecchio's handwriting?" I asked.

"You bet. See how much he wanted to get rid of her?"

"I see that," I agreed, "but did Ms. Julian see it? Did she know about this notebook, or about the phone calls?"

"Well, Vic didn't *tell* her—it'd be *dumb* to before he was sure he could get rid of her. But she could've figured it out. I mean, sure Vic *pretended* to like her and she *pretended* to like him. I mean, it's *show business*. But she *knows* it's show business, so she could've, like, figured it out. You know?"

I wasn't sure I did know. I wasn't sure I'd followed even

half of her statement. But if P. T. Julian didn't know Vic wanted to fire her, she didn't have a motive to kill him—that I knew for sure. "What about the affair? Did Ms. Julian know about that?"

"No." Pia tossed her hair back smugly. "Vic said we had to be careful, because of me being younger, and there might be bad publicity. So we *were* careful, and she never guessed."

I didn't see that she had more to tell us, so Bolt and I started back to the office. In my book, Pia was still the best suspect. After all, Vic had dumped her just that morning, and even if she *hadn't* loved him, that sort of sudden change in a relationship can be hard to accept.

"Change," I remarked sagely to Bolt. "It's hard to adjust to, isn't it? It can make people mess up."

He nodded. "Indeed. I too noticed how uncomfortable Mr. Vecchio seemed during tonight's broadcast. Evidently he couldn't adjust to the changes that transformed *True Story* from harmless, insipid entertainment to heartless, shameless exploitation. At bottom, despite his personal vices, he must have had a sense of decency. Even the improvement in ratings could not make him feel right about being part of such a show, and thus he appeared stiff and awkward on

stage. The changes in the show did indeed, as you put it, make him 'mess up.' No wonder he was in conflict with the woman who brought those changes about."

That wasn't what I'd meant, but it was interesting. So Bolt bought the idea of a conflict between Vic and P. T. And if Vic really had made calls to the syndication company, and if P. T. had found out—well, it could definitely be a motive.

P. T. Julian was seated at the big central desk in the office area, talking into a speaker phone while simultaneously typing away at her word processor. With a jolt I realized that she was talking to our captain, that he'd apparently just agreed that Bolt and I would be part of some sort of follow-up show the next night.

When she spotted us, she switched off the phone. "You're on again tomorrow—center stage this time. Your captain thinks it's a great idea, and the syndication company loves it—my boss says dozens of stations that don't normally carry the show have called already, begging to pick it up. We'll have just one segment for the entire hour—*Who Killed Vic Vecchio?* It'll be huge."

My elbows got sweaty again. "A show about the murder? The

captain really thinks it's a good idea?"

"A *great* idea." She sat back and popped open an Evian bottle. "We'll have a film obit on Vic, clips from tonight's show, a reenactment of the reenactment—all live. And you'll report on the progress you've made on the case."

"Had we made progress? "That might be premature," I said, stalling. "I don't know if we'll have much to report by then."

"Of course you will. I'll bet you can name the murderer by then—and you'll wait and do it on the show, won't you? A live arrest! Just think of how good it'll make you look. And before you make the arrest, you can describe your investigation—the clues you found during the search, all that."

I was flattered by her confidence, but I didn't share it. There was a definite chance I'd end up looking like a jerk on TV. I had a sickening vision of that case of stagefright I got at the police talent show when I froze up during my Bob Newhart impression.

"Investigations don't move that quickly, Ms. Julian. The search, for example—that hasn't turned up any evidence."

She looked irritated. "Are you *trying* hard enough? There *must* be evidence. There was that anonymous note—didn't you

find any evidence related to that? Did you *look*?"

"Sure, we looked." Now I felt irritated. "But we didn't find anything. Even if we had, the person who wrote the note didn't necessarily do the murder—if there *was* a murder. I haven't ruled out accident yet." Actually, I *had* ruled out accident, but if I could make her think I hadn't, if I could convince her there wouldn't be any dramatic revelations during the show, maybe she'd call it off.

Her face turned stony. "It was *not* an accident. There are no accidents on my set—I run too tight a ship. So, if you're not finding evidence, what are you doing?"

Boy, could she be a pain. "Right now we're looking into Mr. Vecchio's relationships with other people on the show. How would you describe *your* relationship with him, Ms. Julian?"

She sighed impatiently. "Fine. A fine professional relationship—mutual respect, friendship, all that. Now, about the show. Marci's first questions will concern the search. How extensive was it? Did you check—"

"I'll ask the questions," I cut in. "Did you know Mr. Vecchio was dissatisfied with you and had called his friends at the syndication company, trying to get you fired?"



She sat back in her chair, stunned. "Don't be ridiculous. He'd never do that. He knew I'm the one who keeps this show going. I direct it, produce it, write it—I'm even filling in as announcer. Damn it, I *saved* the show. My ideas brought the ratings way up and made Vic a star. How could he possibly want me fired? Where did you get such a stupid idea?"

I didn't answer directly, just showed her the notebook Pia Pomfret had given us. "Recognize Mr. Vecchio's handwriting?"

She flipped pages rapidly, skimming the list of his complaints. Her jaw had dropped down so far a hummingbird could've flown in her mouth, easy. "But how could Vic—no, wait. This doesn't mean he wanted me fired. He was just listing concerns to discuss with me. Where did you find this, anyway?"

"That doesn't matter," I said. And really, it didn't. I'd still check with the company about those phone calls, but I was convinced P. T. hadn't known Vic wanted to get rid of her. And that meant she had no reason to want to get rid of *him*. "Now, the note implied something romantic was going on between Ms. Anthony and Mr. Vecchio. Anything to that?"

She shook her head decisively. "Absolutely not."

"And was Mr. Vecchio involved with anyone else on the show?"

She kept her eyes locked on mine. "Not as far as I know."

So Pia was right—she and Vic *had* kept their secret safe, "I see. Now I want to talk with the cameramen, see if there's any film of what happened onstage during the station break."

She grimaced. "I've already checked. The answer's no. We were setting up audience shots, so no cameras were aimed at the stage. You think the knives were switched during the break?"

"Could be. Or it could've happened before the show started."

"During the dinner buffet, for example," Bolt chimed in—and you know, Mother, how unusual it is for him to say anything when I'm questioning people. "Does the entire cast and crew eat at the same time? Would the stage be deserted then?"

"*Fairly* deserted," she said slowly. "Of course, someone could've returned to the stage at any time—but it'd be risky. And Pia did a prop check just before the show, and since the real knife is heavier than the fake one, she'd have noticed if—"

Her voice trailed off uncertainly, and her brow crinkled, like a disturbing thought had

just occurred to her. "Would Pia have noticed the difference?" I asked. "I mean, no offense, but she doesn't seem all that bright. She barely glanced at the props during the check. Who hired her, anyway?"

P. T. Julian's eyes narrowed to a glare. "I did."

"And from what she told us, she didn't have any experience in the business. So if the knives had somehow gotten mixed up by accident, with all those people running around—"

"Impossible," she cut in angrily. "There are *no* accidents on my set. I *told* you that."

"Yeah, sure," I said, trying to calm her down. "I'm sure you're real careful. You check every little detail, don't you?"

"Well, I *have* to," she said, leaning forward, her face heavy with long-suffering. "No one *else* checks. Take those *pimientos*—I told Lucas a million times that the olives on the buffet *must* have *pimientos*. Marci *needs* *pimientos*. He *promised* he'd check. But did he? No. And he absolutely *cannot* deal with people—he lets *everyone* push him around. He's *useless*."

Just then useless Lucas rushed in. He did a doubletake when he saw me, gulped, blinked, wiped his sleeve against his forehead, sweated another pint, and spoke. "Ms. Julian, some local press people

are outside—I tried to get rid of them—and now CNN—I said you can't be disturbed—they won't listen—I—"

"Well, thank *God* they didn't listen." She yanked comb and compact from her purse, did quick repairs, stared into the tiny mirror, and let her face sink into determined moroseness. "Damn it, Lucas! This is *press*! And you tried to get *rid* of them? I swear, when we get back to New York, I'm getting rid of *you*."

She turned on us sharply. "I need you at eight A.M., both of you. We have blocking to do, and you have lines to learn. It takes a hell of a lot of rehearsal to make something like this look natural. And damn it, find some evidence!"

She was gone. Lucas started to follow her, faltered, looked at us, trembled. He looked back and forth six more times, then about collapsed, back hitting the wall and knees buckling. He hung there panting, taking off his glasses and blinking. Poor guy, I thought, and walked over to thump him on the back.

"Hey, she didn't mean it," I said heartily. "About getting rid of you, I mean. You try hard, you care a lot—anybody can see that—and that's what counts, right?"

"Not with her," he said, running a hand through his hair. It

was so thick with sweat that it stayed sticking up, in damp, pointy little red peaks. "She wants results. She fired our producer, our writers, our announcer, half our crew. You gotta be totally dedicated, totally perfect, or she dumps you."

I thumped his back again—maybe a tad hard, since it set him wheezing. "Oh, she can't be as bad as all that. And a guy who works as hard as you, I'm sure lots of people will stick up for you. How about Marci? How do you get along with her?"

"Okay." He wiped his brow again. "She treats me nice."

"I bet," I said, nodding. "She seems like a real nice person. And Mr. Vecchio—well, he's gone now, he can't stand up for you, but I bet he treated you nice, too, didn't he?"

"He treated *me* nice." Lucas's murky grey-blue eyes got murkier. "He seemed like a nice person, too. Once."

"You bet," I said heartily. "And Pia Pomfret—I'll bet she's a friend of yours."

His shoulders jerked. "Pia—she's an angel. So young—so pretty—so thin—so mistreated. An angel!"

So angels are young and pretty and thin and mistreated. I was glad to have those points cleared up. This Lucas seemed like a dim bulb. But at least I'd reminded him he had some sup-

porters. Time to start listing his good qualities, give his ego a boost. "And you—well, you're a real caring person, aren't you, the kind who likes doing favors for folks, helping them out. Am I right?"

His eyes widened, and he gulped in a quick, rabbit-y way. "My God," he said. "You *know*? How do you know?"

I chuckled. Most folks think cops are just tough guys—they don't realize how much our work involves reading personalities, how good we get to be at it. "Hey, I haven't been a cop all these years for nothing," I said. I remembered P. T.'s comment about Lucas letting people push him around. If she did fire him, if he was going to be looking for work soon, he'd have to develop some gumption or he'd end up in another dead-end job. "Now, wanting to help other people—that's a real good instinct. But you also have to look out for yourself. Otherwise—well, you may end up in a spot you don't like. See what I mean?"

He gulped again, and stared at the floor. "Yes, sir."

"Good." I thought of how long job searches can be, of how easy it is to get discouraged. "And don't worry. Searches run into delays—you don't always find what you're looking for right away—but as long as you find it in the end, that's what counts."

He looked up at me now, his eyes surprised and grateful. "You mean that, sir? Is that really all that counts?"

"Sure, sure," I said. The uniforms trooped into the office then, saying they'd combed the coliseum but no luck. I shrugged. "That's okay, boys," I said. I'd figured all along that they were wasting their time, that the notewriter had disposed of the mutilated tabloids long ago. "You can head to the station—we won't find any evidence here tonight."

Glancing at Lucas, I noticed he was still huddled against the wall, shivering, so I winked at him in a friendly way to buck him up. It didn't help—he just shivered harder. Poor kid, I thought. He needs another pep talk. Well, I had to get started on my report, but I could squeeze in a few minutes for him. "Hey, Lucas," I said, "I'm going to the police station now. Wanna come? Would that be a good place to talk?"

The shivers got convulsive. "I—I—please, I don't feel well. I want to go back to my motel. May I? Please?"

Fine. No point questioning him—he obviously didn't know anything about the murder. He didn't look well enough to drive, though. "Your car in the parking lot? Then maybe Sergeant Bolt

should drive you to your motel. Okay with you, sergeant?"

"Fine, sir," Bolt said, looking surprised. "If you think I can handle things alone at this point."

"Sure, sure." Modest old Bolt, I thought—always worrying about his night vision. I took him aside. "Try to build up Lucas's spirits, okay? He's in rough shape."

"Very well, sir," Bolt said, nodding. "I shall endeavor to infuse him with the courage needed for the ordeal ahead. Should I keep the conversation confidential?"

"Good idea," I agreed. If P. T. Julian didn't fire Lucas, there was no point letting her know what a wimp he'd been. "You understand the situation very well, Bolt."

"I didn't understand it at all," he said humbly, "until you laid it all out. Sir, you were brilliant. The insight, the subtlety, the combination of compassion with the firm warning about the danger of ending up in a spot he wouldn't like—brilliant! No wonder your words had such an impact on him."

"Thanks," I said. I've always thought that if I hadn't become a cop I could've been a pretty good guidance counselor. It was nice to know Bolt thought so, too. I watched as he walked off with Lucas, his arm around the

poor kid's shoulder, and I sighed with satisfaction at a good deed well done.

At the station, I glanced through various reports. Nothing to learn from the autopsy—I'd witnessed the murder, so the time and cause of death weren't exactly mysteries. The fingerprint report didn't reveal much, either. The only prints on the murder weapon were Pia's and Gladys's—not surprising, since I'd seen both handle the knife. No prints on the fake knife—the report said it had been wiped clean, and some of the black Magic Marker Pia had smeared on the handle had apparently smudged off. And the only prints on the evidence bag belonged to Pia. I sighed. Well, it didn't look good for her. I jotted some notes for my own report, switched off my desk lamp; and went home.

**A**t seven forty-five the next morning, I picked Bolt up at his house, and we headed for the coliseum. "So, how did things go with Lucas last night?" I asked, just making conversation.

"Highly satisfactory, sir." He patted his briefcase smugly. Odd—Bolt doesn't usually carry a briefcase. "We talked until two A.M. Everything is secured and marked; his cooperation is assured. How do you wish to handle things this morning?"

"We'll just see how things go." I hadn't followed what he'd said about Lucas, but it wasn't worth bothering about—I was sure Bolt gave Lucas some good pointers about job-hunting, and that's all that mattered. "And, Bolt, you know how I get about public speaking; you remember how I blanked out at the talent show. So any time you can chime in—well, I'd appreciate it."

"Yes, sir," he said readily. "Fortunately, I have no anxieties about public speaking, so I shall be honored to serve as your mouthpiece. I know I could never hope to be more. Had you not guided me to a complete understanding of this case, I should not have the confidence to utter a word."

Well, it was good to know I'd guided *him* to a complete understanding of the case; I didn't understand a damn thing about it myself. "Glad I could help," I said uneasily.

"Glad you could help! Oh, sir!" Bolt shook his head. "You're far too modest. Help! You did it all. So. Should I continue with the ploy you introduced yesterday, developing the theme of misadventure in hopes of forcing a conclusive response?"

What the hell was he talking about? "Sounds good," I said.

He babbled on till we reached the coliseum. I nodded a lot, un-

derstanding maybe one word in ten. When we walked onstage, we saw Lucas setting up a row of black and gilt armchairs while P. T. barked orders at him. I didn't see Pia, but I spotted her huge beaded denim bag stashed in a corner. Minutes later Marci showed up, wearing a clinging black shorts-and-shirt outfit. P. T. took her off to the side, I guess going over the script. Finally Pia slouched onstage, looking pouty and carrying an armload of extension cords.

"These are all I could find," she said. "And I looked everywhere. And a fat guy's in the office, asking for you."

"God!" P. T. exclaimed. "It's Ned Wheeler!"

She ran off, returning minutes later with a balding, heavyset, obviously important man. "This is Lieutenant Johnson, Mr. Wheeler," she said. "He's the brilliant detective I told you about, the one who's solved so many cases. Lieutenant, this is Ned Wheeler, head of our syndication company. He flew here to see you solve *our* case. You won't let him down, will you?"

Stagefright was setting in already. It's not like I'd ever heard of this guy, or like I thought he could do me any good or any harm. But important people make me nervous.

He shook my hand, looking at

me shrewdly. "Vic Vecchio was an old friend of mine, lieutenant. Find his killer."

God. Talk about pressure. P. T. showed Ned Wheeler to a front-row seat in the audience, shooed the rest of us to the side, shoved scripts in our hands, and took center stage.

"We have a very moving, exciting tribute planned, Mr. Wheeler," she said. "We'll open with a dark stage, with appropriate music." She motioned to the control booth, and the stage went black. Recorded music sounded—a slowed-down version of the show's theme song, heavy on the bass. "Then," P. T.'s voice rang out, "a single spotlight!"

The spotlight shone, and Marci stepped into it, her face tearstreaked—though I'd seen her a minute before, and I swear she hadn't been crying. She starting going on about how much she'd cared for Vic, glancing at her script only occasionally. I'll tell you, Mother, I choked up. Then she introduced a film piece on Vic's career—P. T. had put it together the night before and still had editing to do, but even in rough form, it was devastating. When I saw the footage of him looking all young and vital on *Stumpers*, and the fadeout to his grin, I almost wept.

"Now," Marci said, "I'd like to introduce some very special guests who will help answer the

question haunting this theater tonight—*who killed Vic Vecchio*? Here's the brilliant detective investigating Vic's death, and this is his loyal assistant. Lieutenant Johnson—Sergeant Dolt—c'mon down!"

Someone shoved me, and I stumbled onstage, feeling like there were already millions of people watching. Marci kissed me on both cheeks. "It's Bolt," I whispered. "Not Dolt. Bolt."

"Whatever," she whispered back, steering us to the arm-chairs. She plopped into the chair next to me. "Now, lieutenant," she said, "tell us about your investigation."

I went utterly blank. Impatiently, she jabbed the script I was holding. I stared, then started reading: "Well, Marci, this is a very tragic case, and a very big one for us. We don't usually get cases this big in our sleepy Midwestern town. But we'll solve it, and we'll give your viewers the TRUE STORY about who killed Vic Vecchio. Right now we're looking into Mr. Vecchio's relationships with other people on the show."

"Other people on the show?" Marci read, sounding shocked. "You mean this is an—what do you call it?—an inside job?"

"Could be," I read. The stage directions told me to nod, so I did. "It just could be." The rest of the page was blank.

"That's how the segment will start," P. T. cut in, stepping forward. "We don't want to give away too much now, Mr. Wheeler—the lieutenant's saving his final revelations for the show so the arrest can happen live. Lieutenant, tonight I want you to say those lines with *much* more feeling. At this point, Mr. Wheeler, we'll move to a reenactment of the fatal reenactment. Bob Barker's flying in to play Vic—won't that be nice? Now—"

Ned Wheeler shifted in his seat impatiently. "Now I wanna hear from the cops. What have you guys found out?"

I took three deep breaths. "Not much yet. I mean, we found out that Mr. Vecchio was having an affair with Ms. Pomfret here, and he broke it off yesterday, and—"

P. T. gasped. "Pia? Vic? An affair? And he broke it off—just yesterday? Oh my God. Pia, take a seat on stage. But that's enough about this for now. Save it for tonight."

"No, I wanna hear now," Ned Wheeler insisted. "Lieutenant, what's your next step?"

Damned if I knew. It isn't fair, I thought. I shouldn't have to put my ignorance on parade like this. The captain's a smart guy, generally, but he'd made a bad mistake when he agreed to



this show, and I might as well admit it right now.

I stood up. "It's all a mistake," I said, but as soon as those words got out, I froze. I looked at the lights, I looked at the camera, and I froze. It was the talent show all over again. "A mistake," I croaked, and sank into my chair.

Bolt leapt up. "The lieutenant dislikes explaining his theories in detail. He finds it difficult to express them in laypeople's language, so he leaves that to me. As he said, Mr. Vecchio's death was a mistake—or, in lay terms, an accident."

I stared at Bolt, stunned. Where was he getting this stuff?

Wheeler wasn't buying it, either. "That's hard to believe. Weren't the knives switched during the station break?"

"That's right," P. T. chimed in. "That *must* be when it happened. Pia did a final prop check just before the show, and the knives were in the right spots then. Right, Pia?"

Pia yawned. "Yeah. I checked. They were fine."

"But you didn't have her check the *blades*," Bolt said. "You just had her lift the knives up—and as the lieutenant remarked yesterday, she barely glanced at them. It would have been a simple precaution to ask her to test the blades—Mr. Vecchio's life

depended upon the right knives being in the right places."

Man, was she steaming. "It wasn't necessary. Pia assured me the knives were correctly placed, and I believed her. I trust my employees to do their jobs competently."

Bolt sighed. "Perhaps you're *too* trusting. That's how accidents happen. Ms. Pomfret was clearly bored and distracted during the prop check, she had no experience before taking this job, and she's only nineteen—did you know that?"

P. T. practically growled. "She told me twenty-two."

"You didn't check?" Wheeler said. "Damn it, P. T., you hired Vic's teenage girlfriend and never checked her background?"

P. T.'s face turned stony. "I assure you, Mr. Wheeler, I'm *very* careful about security, and—"

"Perhaps not careful enough," Bolt observed. "You received an anonymous letter yesterday, implicitly threatening both Ms. Anthony and Mr. Vecchio—**IF I CAN'T HAVE HIM, NOBODY CAN**—yet you delayed for hours before notifying the police."

"That's not fair," Marci put in. "P. T. can't panic whenever we get a crazy letter in the mail. We get crazy letters all the

time—we've got lots of crazy fans."

"But this letter didn't come through the mail," Bolt pointed out. "It was placed on Ms. Julian's desk during the lunch break, suggesting that the writer had access to the backstage area. That should have spurred you to immediate action, Ms. Julian."

"It damn well should," Wheeler said. Now he was growling. "This is incompetence, P. T., pure and simple. Go on, sergeant. You think the person who wrote the letter switched the knives?"

"No," Bolt said. "I alluded to the letter merely as an example of shoddy security. I think—rather, the lieutenant thinks—the knives were switched by accident, before the show. True, the accident *could* have happened during the station break—there *was* great confusion. Why, an angry guest from the first segment charged onstage and became so abusive that Ms. Anthony begged Ms. Julian to come help. But Ms. Julian remained in her control booth, ordering young Lucas to handle the woman—and, if he'll forgive me, he was unequal to the task. Later Ms. Julian said she considers Lucas incapable of dealing with people. Yet she let *him* handle this fracas. I'm sorry to say so, but the show's ill-man-

aged. It's no wonder an accident happened."

Wheeler locked P. T. with a paralyzing stare. "So that's why my friend is dead, P. T.—because you can't do your job, because you're too incompetent to maintain minimal security—"

"I'm incompetent!" she said, her face as hot as his was icy. "I can't do my job! Damn it, I do *everybody's* job. The producer, the writers, the crew—they're incompetent! That's why I had to fire them. The *police* are incompetent. I told them to search backstage, but they found nothing. Nothing! But tell me, lieutenant. Did your officers search the prop room?"

Mother, I've never been so lost in my life. Bolt's accident theory sounded pretty good, but he's tricky—I didn't know where he was headed. I worked my throat for three minutes and finally came up with some saliva. "Sure," I said. "They searched it."

"Did they search *this*?" P. T. raced across the stage, her face so charged-up that her hair seemed electrified, and grabbed Pia Pomfret's big denim bag. She ran straight at me and thrust it into my arms. "You search it. Now!"

What could I do? I reached into the bag and pulled out make-up, a bathing suit, curlers, half a Snickers, bedroom slippers.

And a crumpled brown paper bag.

I opened the bag, and there it was—the tattered remains of a tabloid newspaper, obviously clipped to bits to find letters for the anonymous letter; glue; white gloves with a black smudge. I remembered the lab reports; they'd said some of the black Magic Marker Pia had smeared on the handle of the fake knife had been smudged off, apparently when the knife-switcher wiped off fingerprints. So we had hard evidence linking the letterwriting to the knife-switching, linking Pia to both. The case was solved. But I couldn't feel good. The poor kid—I'd have to send her to prison for life.

"So?" P. T. demanded, hands on hips. "What do you say now? Do you still claim Vic's death was an accident?"

"No," I said. "It was no accident. It was murder." I sank into my armchair, too exhausted to speak.

Obviously, Bolt thought it was just another attack of stage-fright. Loyal he sprang into the gap.

"Murder, indeed, sir. May I have the honor of supplying your final explanation?"

I waved at him weakly. "You bet."

"Well then," he said, "Mr. Wheeler, I must tell you that

the lieutenant never thought your old friend's death to be a mere accident. Certainly not! He knew from the first that Mr. Vecchio was murdered, and that Ms. Julian was the murderer."

P. T. snorted. "Me! Don't be stupid. It was Pia."

"You should say that line with *much* more emotion," Bolt said dryly. "Mr. Wheeler, allow me to lay bare the grounds for the lieutenant's suspicions. Ms. Julian insists on her competence, and the lieutenant was convinced of it—and of her intolerance for others' incompetence. She fired producer, writers, yet did not fire Ms. Pomfret, her most flagrantly incompetent employee. And she *could* not fire Mr. Vecchio, though his personality was unsuitable for the show's new format, for he had too many friends at the syndication company—you, for example. To get rid of Mr. Vecchio, she had to resort to more primitive means."

"That's ridiculous," P. T. said, forcing a laugh.

"And she decided to do it on live television," Bolt went on. "That way, even if Mr. Vecchio survived the stabbing, she'd be guaranteed good ratings for a while. But I'm sure she hoped he'd die. And she set Ms. Pomfret up for the murder. Did you really think, Ms. Julian, you'd

fool the lieutenant into believing you knew nothing about her affair with Mr. Vecchio? You know everything about the show and the staff—he saw that. So you tolerated Ms. Pomfret's laziness and ineptness, keeping her on hand until the time was right to frame her. Yesterday, that time came. You ordered Mr. Vecchio to break off the affair—"

"Ludicrous!" P. T. snapped. "Prove it!"

"I heard you, Ms. Julian," Lucas said quietly. "I was right outside the office, but you didn't notice me—you hardly ever do. You threatened to tell the press if Mr. Vecchio didn't end the affair. He didn't want more stories calling him a dirty old man, so he agreed. It wasn't fair—not to him, and not to *her*." He gazed at Pia, eyes soft with pity and devotion.

She was inspecting her fingernails for flaws in the polish, barely able to keep up an interest in what was going on. "It was no big deal," she said. "I didn't like him much anyhow."

Bolt shook his head. "To complete the frame, Ms. Julian, you wrote the anonymous note, using letters cut from a tabloid of the sort Ms. Pomfret is known to read. You left the note on your desk during the lunch buffet; during the dinner buffet, you switched the knives, then planted the mutilated tabloids, the

glue, and the gloves in Ms. Pomfret's purse. Then you manipulated events to make it seem the knives were switched during the station break when you were in the control booth—the only person on the set with a perfect alibi. So reluctant were you to damage that alibi that you refused to leave the booth even when a guest became disruptive. You made young Lucas handle a situation you'd normally insist on handling personally."

P. T. was looking at me coldly—not at Bolt, at me. Even when he's speaking, people always look at me. "I'm calling my lawyer," she said, "to ask if I can sue you. I believe I can. You have no basis for these lies. The only evidence that you found—that *I* found—clearly points to Pia Pomfret."

Bolt shook his head. "No," he said. "It points to you." He opened his briefcase and pulled out evidence bags containing a tattered tabloid, a bottle of glue, a pair of smudged white cotton gloves. "*This* evidence might have seemed to point to Ms. Pomfret had we found it last night. But we didn't. Lucas?"

Lucas was shaking so hard I was afraid his teeth would shatter, but he faced P. T. Julian squarely.

"You showed me the letter after lunch," he said, "and I knew Vic had dumped Pia, so I was

afraid she'd written it. Then, when I heard you tell the lieutenant you wanted his help with security, I knew you meant the letter, and I—well, I didn't want Pia to get in trouble with the police. So I sneaked backstage during the first segment and searched her purse and found this stuff, and I hid it in my car, and that's why I was late for the station break, and the lieutenant figured it out—he figures *everything* out—so I gave the stuff to Sergeant Bolt, and I'm glad I did, and I hope you fry, you bitch, for trying to frame Pia." He broke into sobs.

"So now," Bolt said, "the question is, how did the duplicate evidence end up in Ms. Pomfret's purse? How did the person who planted it know there should be a black smudge on the glove unless that person had worn the gloves originally used to wipe the knives clean? And how did you, Ms. Julian, know a search of Ms. Pomfret's purse would yield damaging evidence? When last night's search failed to produce the evidence, did you assume she'd found it and disposed of it? Do you carry spare evidence around, just as you carried spare blusher for Mr. Vecchio? Were you hoping to produce that evidence live on tonight's show?"

P. T. swore softly, just once. "It's circumstantial," she said.

"I'll call my lawyer—no, I won't trust her with this. I'll defend myself."

Bolt sighed. "As you wish. Lieutenant, would you like to read Ms. Julian her rights?"

"You bet," I said, collecting what remained of my wits. I should've let Bolt do it—he'd solved the case, he deserved the satisfaction—but I just couldn't deny myself the pleasure of arresting Vic Vecchio's murderer. "You take care of the others."

"Very well, sir." He faced the control booth. "Lights!" he demanded, gesturing grandly. "Ms. Pomfret, Lucas—exit, left, please. I'll take your statements. The rest of you—take five or ten, or whatever you like. There will be no show tonight."

And there wasn't. Ned Wheeler fussed a bit—he'd truly liked Vic Vecchio, he was truly upset about his death—but he was in show business, he had all these extra stations lined up, and he wanted to put on something spectacular. But Bolt took him out for a late breakfast and an early drink, and by midafternoon Ned Wheeler was mumbling about common decency, saying it'd be wrong to exploit this tragic situation. So all those extra stations ended up showing reruns of *Who's the Boss?* that night.

That wasn't the end of *True Story*, though. You know that.

You know Marci made Lucas director and Pia producer, fired them within a week, and runs the show single-handed, starring solo, promising nightly updates of P. T.'s trial as soon as it starts. She calls Bolt and me a million times a day, offering us big bucks if we'll appear as celebrity commentators. But Bolt always says no, so I always say no, too—though I sure could use the big bucks. And you know the show's ratings are better than ever.

And that, to use a familiar phrase, is the TRUE STORY about Vic Vecchio's murder. You can tell your neighbors. Maybe then they'll leave you alone. Maybe not. It's hard to put a lid on something like this. Ellen's told me about these articles she's read saying other talk shows are starting to imitate *True Story*, with the reenactments and the Judgment Machines and the prizes and all the rest. She tells me the articles say *True Story* is the wave of the future, the next logical step for talk shows to take, and pretty soon they'll all have guests battling it out in arenas of some sort, with audiences giving thumbs-up or thumbs-down like crazed Siskels and Eberts. I tell you, Mother, sometimes I look at Kevin and I worry

about the kind of world we brought him into, and about how much worse it's going to get before his time is over. If you've got any reassuring words, I sure wouldn't mind your shooting a few in the direction of

Your loving son,  
Walt

Dear Walt,

Thank you for the explanation. As for reassurance, I wish I had more to offer. Things *are* pretty bad—they were bad when you were a boy, too, though I honestly don't think they were *this* bad. But Kevin has a good father, a good mother, a good head, and a good heart. Those are the best things any child can have. If any young person can survive this craziness, he will.

As for Sergeant Bolt and me—well, you needn't worry. We had a long, lovely telephone chat last night, we're planning a trip to Antarctica, and any tension between us—if there *was* any tension between us, and I'm not saying there was—is in the past. So you can concentrate on thinking about what sorts of frosty souvenirs you'd like to receive from

Your loving  
Mother

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the March issue.*

Old Professor Homer Hathaway had looked forward to rereading Dante's *Divine Comedy* that weekend. Hence, he was annoyed when his doorbell rang. Mumbling about "irksome technological contrivances," he laid the volume aside and pushed himself up from his favorite chair. The doorbell rang again, and Professor Hathaway added "damnable impatient villain" to his complaint.

He opened the door to face officer Timothy Ryan. "What is it?" snapped Hathaway.

"Some very valuable gems were stolen from Quality Jewelers yesterday. We have six suspects in custody, each claiming to be a student of yours and—"

"My students?" The professor was irate; his goatee bristled. "Students in my humanities class? Inconceivable! Outrageous! Doubtless arrested by callous, incompetent authorities seeking a scapegoat. But I dare say they will endure their incarceration with fortitude—as did Savanarola, and Socrates before him. 'Stone walls do not a prison make,' you know. Or as Santayana wrote, 'The prison walls fall before the—'"

"Just a minute!" interrupted the officer, holding up a beefy hand to stem the outburst. "Nobody's been arrested yet. Joe Bernstein, manager of Quality Jewelers, was showing some diamonds to a customer. As he leaned down to get another tray, he glimpsed a young man grabbing a fistful of diamonds and dashing out the door. He sounded the alarm immediately. He now estimates the missing gems to be worth fifty thousand dollars—that's grand theft. We rounded up six suspects in the vicinity who fit Bernstein's sketchy description. A reliable informer tells us that one of the men in custody was the thief and was a student of yours, so—"

"Police state!" declared Hathaway. "But such abominations have arisen in every civilization since time began. What is it you want from me?"

"Well, sir, we'd like you to be present at the interrogation to



identify which—if any—of the six is actually your student.”

“So you want me to be your Judas?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Officer Ryan, controlling his temper with difficulty. “Look at it this way, professor: five of the young men are innocent. Surely you’d like to see justice for them?”

“Oh, very well,” conceded the old professor. “I’ll go, if only to observe your wretched comedy of errors.”

As the six suspects lined up for the interrogation, they greeted the professor, practically in unison, “Good morning, Professor Hathaway!” Homer Hathaway beamed back at them.

“Let’s get on with it,” growled Ryan. “Anyone care to make a statement?”

(1) Mr. Hawkins said, “I’m not the student from Texas. I am not the art major; the fellow in the tan sportcoat isn’t either.”

(2) Mr. Jackson volunteered, “The dentistry major and I are not from Virginia.”

(3) Donald stated, “The chemistry major and I are not from Tennessee.”

(4) Mr. Lambert declared, “The chap in the tan sportcoat, the student from Wisconsin, and I include Arthur, Bertram, and Charles.”

(5) Edward said, “I’m not majoring in art. The man wearing the brown sweater, the engineering major (who isn’t Bertram), and I include Mr. Graves (who isn’t the pharmacy major), Mr. Ingram, and Mr. Lambert.”

(6) Mr. Kelvin declared, “As you can see, sir, the pharmacy major, the fellow from Texas, and I are wearing, in some order, the white sweater, the tweed jacket, and the brown sweater.”

(7) Arthur then spoke: “The man in the white sweater, the biology major (who is not the chap in the black sweater), and I come from South Carolina, Utah, and Wisconsin.”

(8) The student in the black sweater added, “I’m not from Virginia. Frank (who isn’t from South Carolina), the student in the

brown sweater, and I are majoring in biology, engineering, and pharmacy."

The interrogation reached a pause. "Aha!" sniffed the professor. "All these fine lads are my students, assembled from six different states. Quite an outstanding class, if I may say so."

Officer Ryan turned to the suspects. "Empty those bags."

One by one they complied. Books spilled out onto the table.

Professor Homer Hathaway glowed as he noted, "Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*—excellent choice . . . Plato's *Phaedrus*—always very thought-provoking . . . Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha*—fine, but better, I think, in the original Spanish. . . . There I see Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*—an enduring classic. . . . And—my God! What's this? My first edition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*! I'd recognize that special morocco binding anywhere!" He raised a shaky accusing finger at the student wearing the blue blazer. "How could you? You Brutus! You Jekyll! You—you—you Uriah Heep!" He turned his livid countenance toward Ryan. "Officer, arrest that despicable thief at once!"

The diamonds were later discovered in the student's room.

*Who did it?*

## SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

Frank Teacher, the retired salesman married to Teresa, and Claude Flowers, the retired teacher married to Rosie, were the elderly gents who tried to rob the convenience store for excitement.

| HUSBAND           | WIFE   | RETIRED   | DRESS  |
|-------------------|--------|-----------|--------|
| Andrew Gardner    | Quilla | plumber   | floral |
| Bertram Carpenter | Paula  | gardener  | blue   |
| Claude Flowers    | Rosie  | teacher   | yellow |
| Daniel Plummer    | Vicky  | florist   | coral  |
| Elmer Sayles      | Olivia | barber    | green  |
| Frank Teacher     | Teresa | salesman  | azure  |
| George Barber     | Sally  | carpenter | red    |

FICTION

# WORDS AND MUSIC

Dan Crawford



Illustration by Andrew Trabbold

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/97

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The air was warm against her cheeks, and Polijn was sweating. Why therefore, she wondered, did the melted snow that ran into her boots have to be so cold? It was not the first time that day that she had wondered this.

The cold wind and flying snow of the night before had seemed the perfect background for the spookier songs in her repertoire. Everyone in the Boar's Tooth had thrilled to the story of Munufer and the three ghosts. Her own setting of the tale of Eniel and the voices borne on the wind, a song she was personally not very satisfied with, had brought cheering and thrown coins. So she had embarked on the song of Morga and the Demons of Cabiël.

No one had ever told her that the people of Floda believed the forests surrounding them were packed with malevolent demons.

"We can't take chances, missus," the head of the town council had said, escorting her to the edge of town. "You never know when they might be listening." He had glanced up at the trees like a man realizing his boss has just entered the room. "As they have every right to do, of course."

Fortunately a few of her admirers had followed them to the edge of town. All looked guilty at having to exile her in the middle of a snowstorm, and one had a chicken coop he was willing to let her spend the night in. She thought about piling on a little more guilt and possibly moving from chicken coop to a bed at the inn. But the demon fear probably ran deep; one watcher had whispered to her that even the use of the word demon in a public place was considered a temptation to sticky fate.

The snow had stopped by morning, and the wind had died to an occasional whisper. But there were no clear roads out of Floda (the townspeople had no particular need to go anywhere until spring), and the way to the next town was downhill. Slips and skids now and then were inevitable, and to walk for hours in the snow without cold toes would have required far thicker boots than Polijn possessed. Night must eventually fall, too, and there was a hint of impending fog in the air.

Nice if she could use the golden amulet around her neck to conjure up warmer boots or a thicker coat. From past experience, though, Polijn had no doubt she would be provided with a coat of ice. The amulet was as unpredictable as the bizarre sorcerer who had given it to her.

She swept an arm through the snow piled on the north side of an angled trunk. There were people, at least in stories, who had been

given *useful* amulets by sorcerers. A possible song in that, she thought; one of those triads, perhaps: "The Three Useful Amulets." Chempunk, for example, could, by reflecting candlelight from his concave talisman onto a table, fill that table with hot food. Omvui, whose amulet had been shaped like a bottle stopper, had only to put this into a jug to acquire a jug full of strong beer. And there was Balachor, who could spin his amulet and make it point to the nearest warm bed and willing companion.

Polijn glanced at the heavy grey ceiling above the trees. She could do without the companion, but she would like very much to find a place to sleep that would be dry, flat, and warm . . . or any two of the three. Moving slowly among tall trees like the high stones in the gravefields of Nobegow, she looked left and right for any clues to the existence of human life.

What could have been a young tree but wasn't caught her eyes. Making a wide turn, she moved toward it.

The tight, low, stone hut was almost completely uninventing. Had she seen the building first, Polijn would have taken it for a tomb. But that thin streak of smoke from its flat chimney made it a possibility.

She did not aim directly for the door; there was no telling what sort of hermit inhabited this little shelter. There was no sign of any altar big enough for regular human sacrifice, and no mound for the burial of anything that might remain of a visitor. Yet the building was intended as a shrine: the offering box sat out front, just to the left of the door.

Polijn looked down the slope and then checked the sky again. Might as well risk it; even a hermit who practiced human sacrifice might see the use of letting a minstrel live, to spread hymns about whatever one-and-only-true-benefactor-of-mankind might be honored here. That wasn't all she'd spread, but there was just the one way to find out if she'd be required to take news of this shrine anywhere.

A wooden knocker hung in the center of the door. Polijn raised it and let it fall with a dull clunk.

Something rustled and bustled behind the door. All but setting an ear to the wood, Polijn made out voices.

"A little company is what I could use, and it may be somebody who's lost."

"Bah! Open the door for one and you open the door for them all."

The door pulled open. Polijn had had enough time to brace herself

so she wouldn't fall right inside, but she was still leaning in. Turning her head up, she found herself looking at a rounded face just made for smiles. This particular smile bunched the cheeks and all but closed the eyes.

"Why, you poor thing!" the woman cried, taking a step back. "Come in at once! Gaida, you surely wouldn't leave a little thing like this out in a world of freezation!"

"I would."

Polijn stopped to look into a second face. These eyes were closed tight, though the lids were open. The mouth was thin and unfriendly, and the large body underneath continued a general theme of roadblock.

"I can sing for my supper, if it pleases you," Polijn said, not moving to step inside. Her mind flipped quickly through her repertoire for something appropriate. "The snow in the fields . . ." she began.

Both women jumped back. "Thank you, dear," said the smiling woman, her smile a little narrower now. "Just come in, will you, come in." One dimpled hand came out to usher Polijn inside while the other pushed the door shut so quickly as nearly to leave Polijn's heels outside. "We have to be careful about singing at this time of night at this time of year."

"Should have known better," growled Gaida. Polijn could only agree. It was this kind of superstition that had gotten her ejected from Floda after all.

"You're just in time!" exclaimed the smiling woman, smiling more broadly now that the door was closed. "Come in, dear, come in. Don't be shy."

Shyness was not at all the problem. There were two very large women in a very small cottage, and the cottage was a good deal smaller inside than it had been outside.

Books were stacked higher than Polijn had ever seen them outside of a royal treasury. She supposed they served more as insulation than anything else; they were rather too mixed with rags and broken furniture to be readily available for use. It was too dark in the cottage to be sure what anything stacked against the walls out of the light of the fireplace was. Everything had been in place for some time, she could see. The two women didn't have to think before turning and making their way through the narrow paths in and among their treasures. A body would twist, the shoulders just missing a cobwebbed bolt of cloth, the hips bouncing just beyond a metal platter.

"We were about to eat," the smiling woman said, "when we heard you knock."

"Funny coincidence," growled Gaida.

"Pay her no mind, dear. She doesn't like the wind. Gets in her ears." The woman moved to the fireplace and rummaged in a stack of debris next to it. "Here you are."

She came back through the corridor among artifacts. "Here you are," she said again, pushing the bowl into Polijn's hands. "Come up to the fire, do. My name's Nolis, dear, if you need introductions to come in."

Polijn needed instructions to come in. Nevertheless, she stepped closer to the fire, surreptitiously wiping out the bowl with her hands, "My name is Polijn. I've come from Floda."

"Why didn't you stay there?" muttered Gaida. "Besides the fact that you'd be crazy to stay in Floda."

"Her business is none of our business, Gaida," Nolis told her. Taking up a ladle, the woman stirred something in a pot hanging in front of the fire. "Oh yes, this should warm us all up."

Polijn stepped up. Nolis ladled out a dollop of something reddish brown with lumps. It smelled good. As the steam cleared, she could see that the lumps were nuts.

"Here." A spoon was thrust at her by Gaida. It was a bit rusty at the edges.

"Oh, kaklutschnah!" exclaimed Nolis. "For beauty's sake, get her a *good* spoon! A *good* spoon!"

The rounder woman spoke with so much violence that Polijn smiled up at Gaida, hoping to show that this was none of her doing. Polijn hated to be in the middle of an argument.

So busy was she trying to conciliate the taller woman that she paid no attention to the ladle Nolis was holding. She was stunned for only a moment after it struck her. But by the time she was alert again, she was on the floor with a knee in her back.

"A chair, a chair, we need a chair!" Nolis called. Gaida moved into the shadows and came back with a chair.

Polijn felt the ropes but decided it was best to make up her mind what to do before she did anything at all. This method had kept her from getting hurt so far.

Only when the gag went into her mouth did she begin to struggle. She needed her mouth to do whatever might get her off this chair and out of this cottage. But she couldn't pull away from Nolis's expert touch.



"There now!" said the woman, still smiling. "Sorry about all this, dear. But we're nearly out of time if we're to call our demon."

"Yesterday would have been better," growled Gaida.

"Well, she wasn't here yesterday." Nolis picked up the ladle. "It would be better if we had someone younger, too. Khial'liya likes very young sacrifices, according to the Black Book of Iansin."

"He likes very old sacrifices, according to the Tan Book of Artine," grumbled Gaida, reaching for a stack of books.

Nolis waved one hand down. "We've been all through that; this is the sacrifice we have. Let's just be ready."

She turned and took the kettle from its hook, setting it on a stack of blankets that might or might not have been concealing a bed. "That'll do for supper tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night," Gaida told her, "I expect to be dining on pheasant."

"Where will you get a pheasant, dear? Oh! Oh, to be sure. Khial'liya will be serving us, won't he?" She set a forefinger in the middle of the dimple in her right cheek. "The first thing I'll ask for is a nice hot cup of tea with my dear old mother."

"Knowing your mother, it'll be a hot cup of tea even without the demon's intervention." Gaida somehow found enough space on the floor to sit herself down, crossing her legs. "I shall ask that Floda be burned to the ground and all the inhabitants brought before me naked as slaves."

"You'll have a demon as slave," Nolis reminded her, setting the ladle into the kettle.

Gaida's nostrils drew back. "They won't be working for me. But I'll think of things for them to do, all the same."

Polijn looked from one hostess to the other. They didn't seem to have any thought about what the demon might do *to* them, only what he would do *for* them. This was not wise. Polijn had had some slight experience of demons. Slighter would have been better.

Nolis took up Polijn's pack and began to rummage. "If you sing for your supper, my dear, you must have . . . ah!" She drew out Polijn's fidcual by the neck. "Lovely!" she said, running a thumb lightly across the strings. "Do you mind, dear? It would be a great help to us. You'll be dead in a little while—well, rather more than a little while, I'm afraid—but we'll build a little shrine to you and put your instrument in it, to show how you helped us so."

"She didn't exactly volunteer, you know," grumbled Gaida.

Nolis looked around for space on the floor. "We didn't quite ask

her, either, did we? For all we'll ever know, maybe she would have jumped at the chance."

The larger woman actually found a spot on the crowded floor to deposit her bulk. Polijn would have found this rather amusing, had it not also been obvious that both women had found spots between her chair and the door.

Nolis strummed the fidcual in an experimental way, showing that she was not completely new to this. "Well, let's begin, shall we?"

Her voice was a cool, clear treble, to Polijn's surprise. That Gaida was more of a low alto was not as much of a surprise. Not entirely from professional interest, Polijn strained to make out the words of the song, but what she could discern in the duet was completely unintelligible to her:

"Shet yeah tupoid now yeah nap

Cumpro soleb at perhap:

Khial'liya!"

She decided she didn't like it much. If she was to be killed as she sat here, she would have preferred the tune to be something in a gloomier key, with words of regret for the victim and of foreboding for those who slew a minstrel who was just trying to make a living and avoid death by freezing.

"Shet yeah tupoid now yeah nap

Cumpro soleb at perhap:

Khial'liya!"

The air shivered. Shadows grew as the fire died to a pile of dull red rocks. Something that was not smoke rose from them, moving as a mere outline of a shadow across the dim glow. This fell to the floor and coalesced into a smoky little lump. What might have been an eye, except it was way too flat, opened in the center.

This was unpleasant. Polijn had realized, of course, that she was to be the sacrifice with which the women expected to buy a demon's service. But she had assumed, on rather short acquaintance, that this couple couldn't possibly have the power to attract a demon's attention. Now she wondered if they might even have the power to make it do their bidding.

No sense waiting to find out: she began to wriggle against the ropes. Escape was not Plan A: the women were much larger than she was and were blocking the path to the exit. But there might be a chance for her if she could reach the golden amulet under her tunic. The sorcerer who gave it to her had conversed with demons, though the conversation had run more to swapping jokes than giving com-

mands. The amulet was bound to be something no one here expected.

"Shet yeah tupoid . . ."

Polijn could feel the alien mind waking in, or perhaps emerging into, the room. She twisted, trying to get a hand from behind her back and up front under cloak and tunic. The smoky lump put out an arm, and then another. Then another, and then a fourth: they could be legs, she supposed. Or even teeth, since demons were hardly restricted by probability.

Having twisted right without much luck, she twisted left. She had assumed Gaida had no reason for tying the rope so tightly around her waist except to make her less comfortable. But she found now that her wrists would by no means come above the crude belt.

She leaned forward as far as she could, curling her shoulders inward. The amulet could come down to her hands, in that case.

" . . . now yeah nap . . ."

The middle finger of her right hand just brushed the gold disc, and then a cramp seized one shoulder, sending her back upright for a second. That would not do: silly to pay attention to a little pain when so much pain was hanging in the balance. She bent forward again and this time nearly caught hold of the disc between middle finger and forefinger. But the metal squirted free of the grip, and the amulet slid across her body to the other side. Polijn twisted to try to stop it, knowing the attempt was futile, and struck her head on a stack of pots to her left. A handle or fork sticking out of one tore at her gag and her lips.

" . . . Cumpro soleb at perhap: . . ."

The two women looked up at her from their seats on the floor. There was much at risk for them, too, if Polijn found a way out. The many-legged lump was up and moving now, left and right, experimenting with the motion. Polijn swung her shoulders, bringing the amulet back over her stomach. What, she wondered, was she going to do with it once she did bring it out?

" . . . Khial'liya! . . ."

The wriggling shadow grew larger and lumpier, blotting out more of the dim light of the coals. It was rapidly becoming too late.

"Shet yeah tupoid now yeah nap . . ."

In a distant, professional corner of Polijn's mind she thought what a bitter, ironic song it would make, the tale of a minstrel consumed by a being summoned with a song. The thought was so delicious

that for that reason alone she felt she ought to survive: someone had to produce the song.

The idea rolled around in her head as the demon rolled and skittered on the floor. The leggy lump tripped over a stray pot too near the fire. The idea of the song rolled into the concept of survival, disturbing en route the memory of Gaida saying, "Open the door for one, you open the door for them all."

Polijn shook the gag completely out of her mouth, pulled her body upright, and sang:

"Call the music, call the rhyme;

Call, to all that hear, the time

When Kanis strode, his dagger red

From those on whom his bright blade fed."

It was an old song, an easy song, a song that rattled from the mouth good and fast: a song, moreover, of a hero whose profession had been hunting down demons. Polijn hoped the singing of the women had the door wide open.

There were now two openings in the lump on the floor and a burning coal in each that slid in Polijn's direction. She wished she were a little clearer on whether those things touching the floor were legs or teeth.

"The horn of Kanis rang to cheer

Those innocents on whom the fear

Of ancient horror came by night,

Some of whom died, and not of fright."

"... Cumpro soleb at perhap:

Khial'liya!"

The demon's movement was steady as it came toward Polijn, reaching out with something that seemed neither leg nor tooth. But a pale blue outline now stood between the large lump and its victim. This was not easy to see; the only thing in focus was a golden blade in the outline's left hand.

The silhouette did not hesitate. (They didn't, in Polijn's songs; that gave the audience time to wander away.) It leaped into the lump, which leapt to meet it. The already uncertain light from the coals dropped even lower.

"Shet yeah tupoid ..."

"He cared not for the demon's claws...."

Impossible to follow the progress of the battle in this light. Kanis's outline fell back once, throat invisible. Then the demon retreated, obscured by a blue blur as an arm whipped back and forth with that

gold blade. The combatants hit a stack of books and sent a clay pot rolling down next to Gaida. Polijn could hear no heavy breathing. She supposed neither of the combatants breathed.

"... soleb at ..."

"Bright and stabbing came his blade. ..."

"... perhap ..."

Nolis and Gaida sang louder; Polijn started to shout. Gaida picked up the clay pot and flung it at the outline of the demon-fighter. Polijn was glad it hadn't come in her direction. It would be wise to try to pull loose before Gaida thought of that, but she needed all her strength for the song.

"... yeah tupoid now ..."

"Charging like a horse he thrust ..."

Neither fighter had a clearcut advantage yet. Polijn recalled suddenly that Kanis, however heroically, did die at the end of the song, slaying a final demon. There was no reason that this battle would end in such a tie. After all, this demon was presumably real, whereas Kanis was little more than an illusion, conjured up by a song when the time and place happened to be right. If she reached the last verse before Kanis managed to finish off Khial'liya, what would be her prize in this singing contest?

"Not alone did Kanis fight ..."

"... yeah nap

Cumpro soleb ..."

She had not gone too far to insert the auxiliary verses, comic relief in an often grim narrative, of the hero's wenching, guzzling pals Holz and Pajerno. Polijn had always felt these stanzas spoiled the classical purity of the original song, but they were often necessary if you had that kind of audience. If they gave the conjured Kanis time to finish off the demon, this was that kind of audience.

Two more silhouettes, one pink, the other purple, began to stumble around the room, doing rather more damage to the household than the combat on the hearth. It was a pity there were no verses in which either of these men actually helped Kanis in battle. A spoon just missed Polijn, dislodged from a mountain of cloth by the pink outline. She heard a cry and a thump as something struck her fiducial, but Nolis resumed play almost immediately.

"Khial'liya!"

"Knelt with arms behind her back ..."

Polijn hadn't realized that these verses would also cause all of the barflies Holz and Pajerno associated with to appear as well. Trip-

ping over a couple of red outlines, Kanis pulled the demon around him. One leg/arm/tooth struck Polijn's left boot and stuck. She kicked it loose and went on singing.

Open the door for one and you open the door for them all, she thought. Kanis had actually lived, but his friends were believed by most experts to have been the addition of a later singer who felt the tale needed lightening. So apparently it was possible to sing up things that had never existed.

"Kanis drew his demon sword:

Birulph's generous reward.

So light the blade it seemed to float;

It never missed a demon's throat."

A rose-colored flame leaped from Kanis's right hand. Polijn had several seconds to admire her work before Khial'liya came forward and swallowed it. She shrugged. She could not, then, just make things up. They had to be things that had existed already, at least in songs. Or maybe Holz and Pajerno had existed. Adding to the scholarship of an old song gave her added incentive to survive.

"Cumpro soleb at perhap . . ."

"Demons flew before his frown . . ."

Polijn ran through her repertoire again; there were songs about other demon-hunters. One of them might be willing to give Kanis a hand. She thought of her amulet and the sorcerer who gave it to her. There were songs about him, all of which he'd written himself. She shook her head. He'd be as likely to fight on the side of the demon.

She leaned back. There was a thought.

"... yeah tupoid now yeah . . ."

"Women walked into the fray;

They had words to sing and say.

The smile of Nolis was well-known,

While Gaida's might was hers alone."

Behind the battle, whichever way it was going, Polijn had felt the hostile mind of the demon hammering at the back of her mind. It had had time, before Kanis's appearance, to identify her as its sacrifice and, had Polijn not been busy with other thoughts, would have intruded on her consciousness with promises of what was to come.

Now she felt that peripheral pressure lessen as a second pair of singers appeared on the floor. Her own concentration almost dropped as she tried to figure out where there was room for them

all. But she sang on, and so did all four singers on the floor, two cheering Khial'liya to victory, and two ordering him to go away. The second couple sounded a great deal like Polijn, but they were authentic enough to attract the demon's gaze. A golden blade plunged down.

White light burst from the wound, accompanied by a hot wind. Polijn went over backwards, losing sight of the light in a cascade of books and rags.

When she sat up again, she was surrounded by blankets. There was no chair, and a broad back was rising on her left.

"Good morning, dear," said Nolis, looking over a shoulder. "Ready for a bit of breakfast?"

Until she saw the ropeburn, Polijn wondered if she'd been dreaming. Then she saw Gaida sweeping up broken pottery, moving in and around heaps of toppled books. One hand went inside her tunic for a weapon. That was foolish, and she pulled her hand out again at once. They could have killed her at any time during the night if they'd had any grudge against her.

Nolis understood what she was thinking. "No hard feelings, dear. There are plenty of demons where we found that one."

"We'll need to write another song," growled Gaida. "Takes years."

"Nonsense," Nolis told her. "We know how it's done now, so I dare say we'll be ready this time next year." She turned to Polijn, "And you've taught us to be wary of minstrels when we look for another sacrifice. Thank you so much, dear."

There was nothing much to say except, "You're welcome," so Polijn said it.

They breakfasted on the remnants of the previous night's stew. Polijn was careful to keep her eyes on that ladle, but it did nothing more alarming than scoop the leftovers into a pot for Polijn to carry with her.

"Do come see us when next you're in the territory, dear," said Nolis as Polijn made her way outside, having first checked her fidual and her pack. "Of course we may be living in a palace then, but we'll remember you."

"You'll clutter a palace the same as you did this place," Gaida rumbled.

"Farewell," said Polijn, and closed the door, hoping she was closing the door for all of them. She had been known to whistle while on the road. Now, though, after a glance into the trees, she started downhill in silence. □



# Feasting with Foxes

## Clyde Haywood



**S**ince one paper clip straightens pretty much like another, and since there are not many different ways to review the same eighty-six mostly thin files, and since the view from a single small window into a blind alley doesn't

change much, Allen Wade was bored. In the fall of 1968 when he started with the finance company, the title management trainee had convinced him he would soon be on his way up in Atlanta, or at least in Charlotte. But when the title of office man-

ager became his after only six months of training in Richmond, he found himself shuffled, cut, and dealt out to a small town on the North Carolina coast where he managed one lonely secretary vainly battling middle age armed with mascara and miniskirts, one part-time collector supplementing his salary as one of the county's six deputy sheriffs, and himself.

True, the office saw lots of traffic in the summer. But that was mostly vacationers who had underestimated their ability to spend money at the beach and needed the one or two hundred dollars their national cards—issued by some other office—guaranteed them. That kind of business didn't give much opportunity for the kind of "creative credit management" Allen had heard about before he took the job. Even worse, it provided no chance for followup work during the slow season to come.

Allen's social life was as seasonal as his business. When he went to North Carolina in the spring of 1969, living in a beach town frequented by vacationing or weekend college girls seemed quite the life for a twenty-three-year-old bachelor. So what if there was a professional vacuum? That just left more time and energy for the girls.

From a small inheritance he made a down payment on a neat

little cottage miles up the coast from the public areas, with its own little patch of sand and no near neighbors of any sort. He had *Playboy*-inspired dreams of college cuties—or working girls for that matter, dropouts can't be intellectual snobs—romping bare-bottomed in the surf, soaking up the rays on his tiny beach and satisfying his greatly overestimated needs all over the quaint little place in all the ways that a horny young male egotist can imagine.

The girls did come, starting with two he found huddled on the beach on a rainy night when all the motels were full, then some of their sorority sisters. By the end of the summer, he was calling them his "Beta Bunnies," and "Wade's Warren" was the most popular beach accommodation for the summer students of a genteel old Southern girls' school. He was known in every beach joint around as a genuine party animal.

But there was the rub. The end of summer did come. On the weekend after Labor Day, the beach joints began to empty. By October they were closed for the season. The summer girls were back to full-time classes and frat parties at the boys' schools. Beach weekends at Allen's gave way to football weekends a long way inland and sorority balls that didn't include a loan officer

some of the sisters had met at the beach.

In June, July, and August he usually left the office early on Fridays. On that gray Friday in October he had no reason to leave when closing time finally dragged itself to his door. Not that he could fail to notice closing time. His secretary, Miss Just-call-me-Sherry Bailey would see to that.

She pecked on the glass that partly separated Allen's cubicle from the rest of the loan office and called to him as though he were on the other side of a wide chasm instead of behind a three foot desk.

"Oh, Allen," she said, tapping her watch.

He had never told her to call him by his first name. That had been her own idea.

She half closed her eyes in what he took to be an unconscious imitation of a Hollywood seduction. "Mother's visiting her sister in Greenville this weekend, so you'd be welcome to keep me company for supper, or—" she paused and blinked at him "—whatever."

Thirty-nine if she's a day, Allen thought, and she knows as much about being a woman as I do about being an antelope. This is her idea of how to seduce her handsome young boss.

"No, thanks," he said aloud, barely lifting his eyes from the

half-memorized file on his desk. "I've got plans."

"Well, you know the way if your plans should change. Toodle-oo," she called as she waved from the door.

*Toodle-oo*, Allen thought. Nobody says toodle-oo, not even in the movies. Oh well, I said I had plans for the weekend. What are they?

"I plan," he said aloud to the empty office, "to drink beer and see if I can pick up Jenny."

Jenny was the only barmaid left in town worth picking up. She worked in the only bar left in town worth drinking in. All the beer joints and beachfront motels had closed, but the Holiday Inn remained open through the winter, serving Sunday dinner to North Carolina farmers and hardware merchants and providing lodging to traveling salesmen and occasional tourists, tiring early on their way to or from the year-round beaches farther south. The Inn featured what passed for a lounge in North Carolina in the 1960's—a dimly lit room off the restaurant where you could buy beer or a glass of wine but not a mixed drink. The lounge, in turn, featured Jenny.

Jenny was Allen's age, more or less. She came from a farm community a hundred miles inland, and as far as Allen knew, she had never been any farther

from home than she was now. He estimated her I.Q. at ninety percent of her bust measurement. She was loud, overpainted, and not the sort of girl Allen's mother would have wanted him to bring home. But Allen wasn't planning to take her home, just back to the beach cottage as he had done a couple of other times since Labor Day when he couldn't find anybody better and she wasn't already taken by some salesman or trucker.

He hurried through the lobby, barely slowing at a greeting from Clarence, the nightclerk-manager-franchisee of the Inn, and on into the lounge. He had hoped and half expected to find Jenny alone. Not only was it too early for most of the regulars, but there was a high school football game that evening. The contest held no appeal for Allen, but it would draw most of the locals away from any other form of entertainment. As his eyes grew accustomed to the near darkness, however, he saw Jenny seated with two strangers at a table near the far end of the bar.

Allen had never learned whether Clarence didn't mind his lounge waitress's sitting with the customers or whether Jenny just didn't care if he did mind. Either way, that's what she was often doing when she

wasn't actively serving customers.

"Come on over, Al," she called to him with her usual siren volume.

Allen saw one of the customers motioning to her to be quiet.

A hopeless task, he thought as he started toward them. If the man didn't want him to come over, Allen figured, he must be trying to pick Jenny up himself. All the more reason to get over there and cut him out early.

Jenny was sitting sideways to the door where she could see any arriving customers. The man who had been motioning sat to her left, facing Allen as he approached the table. He was huge, obese, and now folded his hands across his enormous belly.

He looks, Allen thought, like a big fat frog.

Allen greeted Jenny with a peck on the cheek and nodded to the fat man.

"I'm Allen," he said. "Allen Wade."

The frog man took Allen's extended hand in a big soft mitt and said in a surprisingly high, squeaky voice, "Webb Wickersham's the name. Some folks call me Wide Webb, but I don't know why. This here is Billy Webb. His last name's the same as my first because we're relat-

ed. He's my step-neighbor-in-law."

The big man laughed harder at his own joke than anyone else did. Billy Webb, who looked to Allen like a typical lanky red-neck, took the loan officer's hand in a corn-grinder handshake like a country politician's.

"Hey, y'all," said Jenny as Allen sat down. "Maybe y'all ought to talk to Al. He's in the money-lending business."

"Who needs money?" Allen asked of no one in particular.

Wickersham forced his wide mouth into a unconvincing smile, almost closing his eyes with the rolls of fat he pushed up his cheeks.

"Jenny, you talk too much," he said. "Get Allen a beer on me. And bring me and ol' Billy another round."

Jenny hopped up to fill the order. Allen gave her a familiar pat on the bottom to establish his territoriality against the two men he now saw as most inferior rivals. He was sure she'd prefer him to either of these homely fossils.

"Kitchen open?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "But they ain't doing no business either. They'll sell a bunch of hamburgers and french fries later on when the game lets out, but we won't do no good in the lounge all night. About all the regulars but you got families, and they'll

be with them for the game instead of out drinking beer."

"I didn't want a local business report," said Allen. "I just need some supper. Bring me a sandwich platter of some kind."

Jenny slipped around behind the bar, yelled, "Cheeseburger and fries," through an order window into the kitchen, and trotted back to the table with three bottles of beer on a small plastic tray.

As she served, she asked Wickersham, "Why'd you want me to shut up? You said you needed twenty-five hundred dollars to make ten thousand in a week. Allen's a loan office manager. Maybe he can loan you the money."

The big man laid his head back and sucked deeply on his beer, his eyes half closed. Foam flecked his grizzled mustache.

It's not a frog he looks like, Allen thought, it's a bull walrus enjoying himself in a rainstorm. I wonder if walruses have shaggy gray manes like his.

At last the man set his beer down and responded to Jenny's question.

"My dear child, not every business can deal with every other business. Now I think the time has come to talk of other things."

"That's right," said Billy Webb. "This guy might be a police."

"Al ain't no po-lice," said Jenny. "He don't even like po-lice. Least he don't when they drive up to his little beach place when we're skinnydipping." She giggled and patted Allen's cheek.

"That don't matter none," said Billy. "We don't need him hearin' about our business."

"Now, now, children," said Wickersham. "Let's just all forget the subject of mine and Billy's finances and talk about something more pleasant, like having a tooth pulled, or perhaps the war in Vietnam."

Again he laughed heartily at his own joke and steered the conversation to country music, sending Jenny to the jukebox for a quarter's worth of his favorite selections.

They spent the next two hours chatting about car racing, state politics, television shows—topics that would not normally have held Allen at the table for twenty minutes. But he had become like a housecat outside a closed door—the more they wanted to shut him out of their business, the more he wanted in. He bought them round after round of beer, trying to pace himself at one beer to two each for the others.

The beer seemed to have no more effect on Wickersham than on the bottles he drank it from, but Billy Webb's eyes grew ever more bleary, his speech ever

more slurred. At last, when Wickersham left for the men's room, Allen saw his chance. He sent Jenny to the jukebox with a handful of change and told her to pick the six songs she liked best. That should give him plenty of time. She couldn't decide what day it was in less than twenty minutes.

"What was it you guys were needing that money for?" he asked softly as the first record started.

His conspiratorial tone seemed to work.

"To buy a truck," Billy whispered back.

"A truck?" said Allen. "What's the big secret about a truck?"

"It ain't the truck that's the secret," said Billy. "It's what we're going to haul in it."

"What are you going to haul?"

"We was gonna haul moonshine," answered Billy. "We got a still. We got a load made. But we ain't got a truck. Webb's got this friend named Johnson that was going to front us the money, but he just up and disappeared. We got a ten thousand dollar buyer all lined up, but we ain't got no way to get the load out to him, and a moonshine buyer don't never front you nothin'."

At that a squeaky voice behind Allen said, "Billy Webb, have you never learned that a

wise stillhand should be seen and not heard?"

Wide Webb Wickersham had returned. He eased his bulk on to the little tavern chair.

"Why should he be seen and not heard?" asked Jenny, who had just finished punching in her selections.

"Because Billy just told this lad too much, my dear," the wide man answered. "Well, at least now Allen knows why he doesn't really want to lend us any money. Little lads from loan offices help schoolteachers buy Chevrolets. They don't help bad men buy booze buggies. Right, Jenny?"

He patted Jenny's thigh as he spoke. She giggled, looked at Allen, and giggled again.

Allen felt his face grow warm. Everything about Webb Wickersham was beginning to bother him, from the way he called Allen "lad" to the way he kept his big soft hand on Jenny's thigh after his first pat.

"I wouldn't have to write it up as a truck," he snapped. "I could say Jenny's buying a Chevrolet."

"And just what would you show the company for title papers on that Chevrolet?" Wickersham asked.

Allen couldn't respond. To his surprise, Billy could.

"I had a cousin that worked in a bank over in Raleigh," said the lanky bootlegger. "He used to

get money to gamble with out of the bank. He took a bill of sale and what he called—I think—a contract for a title or something like that."

"Was it a contract to furnish title?" Allen asked.

"That sounds right," said Billy. "And he'd put down that the car was from Alabama on account of he said that wasn't a title state."

"It's still not," said Allen.

"Anyway," Billy went on, "if anybody in the bank was to check behind him, that held them off for a month or so, and if he was winning he'd pay off the loan, and if he was losing he'd roll it over."

"What does that mean, 'roll it over'?" Jenny asked.

"He'd write another one up the same way and use it to pay off the old one," said Billy. "Maybe Allen could do that, or maybe he's got some money of his own he could throw in with us."

Wickersham shook his massive head. "No, he doesn't, and he doesn't want to make any phony loans and put up the company's money either. He's the rabbit kind."

"What do you mean, Al's the rabbit kind?" asked Jenny.

"There's two kinds of people," said the fat man. "There's the kind that live in holes like rabbits. That kind finds a quiet lit-



tle job in a quaint little town. They stay out of everybody's way, and sooner or later they get to be a deacon in the church. And later on they die and they're buried by their grandchildren.

"Then there's the kind that weren't made to live in holes—the kind that runs with the foxes, feasts on the hare, flees from the hound. Me and old Billy are the fox kind. Maybe you too, Jenny. You look like a vixen."

As he said her name, he slid his hand up her thigh and patted her fanny under her little black cocktail-waitress skirt.

That did it!

I won't run, Allen thought, because I won't have to. But I will have this one feast.

"I can get your damned twenty-five hundred," he said.

Wickersham shook his head again. "No, my boy, I can't let you do that. I bet that's more than you make in three months, isn't it? You can't afford to take that kind of risk."

"Never mind what I make," fumed Allen, who wouldn't make twenty-five hundred in four months. "What about the risk you and Billy take?"

"We thrive on risk," said Wickersham. "You stick with the Chevrolets."

His hand was still on Jenny's bottom. He patted again, then

squeezed. Jenny looked at Allen and giggled again.

"You worry about your risk, and I'll worry about mine," Allen stormed at the big man. "I'll get you your damned money, but I'll have to have it back with carrying charges, plus I want a third of the profit."

Wickersham stared at him for several seconds, then turned and looked at Billy. Billy nodded.

Wickersham turned back to Allen. "By God, you're serious, aren't you? Well, if you're fool enough to give twenty-five hundred dollars to a couple of rascals to run illegal alcohol, we're fools enough to take it. Let's shake on it."

They shook hands all around and agreed to meet at the lounge early Monday evening when Allen could bring the money. At closing time Jenny left with Allen, but she didn't help his ego much when he heard her tell Wide Webb that she would get in trouble with Clarence if he caught her going to a motel guest's room.

The next morning Allen rolled Jenny out of bed well before noon, her usual Saturday starting time, and drove her down to his office. He pulled an old file to find a Chevrolet vehicle identification number. He changed a couple of digits and typed out the paperwork for a used car

loan in Jenny's name in the gross amount of two thousand six hundred and forty dollars with twenty-five hundred net to borrower. He dated the check for the following Monday and instructed Jenny about when and where they would meet to cash it.

Jenny had to work Saturday night, the busiest time at the lounge. Allen hung around until closing time and took her back to his place again. He tried to persuade her to stay over Sunday. She wasn't working that night. But she insisted on going "up country" to see her parents. So the Sabbath passed more slowly for Allen than even his October weekdays.

He went to the lounge, but under local blue laws he couldn't even buy a beer on Sunday. He just sipped soda, watched a dull football game between two teams he didn't care about, and tried to avoid talking to the two other stranded customers and the grayhaired waitress who worked there on Jenny's days off.

Finally Monday came. As he had instructed her, Jenny met him at ten o'clock at the bank where his employer maintained its accounts.

"Joe," he told the branch manager, "Jenny's making a private purchase of a Chevy from a guy

in Alabama, and he won't take a check. Can you cash her out?"

Joe could and did. After Allen and Jenny left the bank, he slid the money into his pocket and went back to his office, dreading the rest of the day. He handed Sherry the paperwork on the Chevrolet loan and gave her the same story he had given Joe the banker.

Processing the loan took all of twenty minutes and left a long, empty day ahead. Unfortunately Sherry tried to fill it for him, sitting in his office most of the time with her micro-miniskirt halfway up her stomach and the slack white flesh of her inner thighs shining at him like dead fish bellies. She prattled on endlessly, spouting vague generalities about the wild weekend she had spent with her mother gone, even though he was sure she hadn't shared her bed with anything more interesting than a paperback novel and a cat.

At last it was five o'clock. For the first time since Labor Day, Allen beat Sherry out of the office. He was at the Holiday Inn by five fifteen. He rushed through the lobby. Clarence looked up from a mystery magazine as he passed.

"Don't get mixed up with Webb Wickersham," called the innkeeper. "He's bad news, Allen. He's been coming around here off and on for fifteen or

twenty years, sometimes spending big bucks, and he ain't had an honest job the whole time. I saw you with him and his cousin or whatever he is the other night, and they're back in here now asking for you. Whatever they're up to, boy, it's bad business. Listen to me now. Stay away from them."

Clarence couldn't have known it, but he had just removed Allen's last bit of fear that Wickersham might take his money and never be seen again. If he had been coming around for fifteen years, he wouldn't leave for twenty-five hundred dollars. Besides, he hadn't wanted Allen to put up the money in the first place.

"Don't worry, Clarence. I can take care of myself," he called over his shoulder.

But he thought, let your grandchildren bury you, rabbit; this time, I'm feasting with the foxes.

Wickersham and Billy Webb were seated at the same table as before. Jenny stood beside Wickersham's chair with her tray dangling at her side. It was early on the slowest night of the week, and there were no other customers in the lounge. Allen joined them and handed the money openly to Wickersham. The big bootlegger pocketed it without counting it.

"We'll meet you back here on

Sunday to settle up," he told Allen as he got up to leave.

Allen looked at Jenny. "You working Sunday?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "Maggie James has got that shift, and as nosy as she is, with you and two strangers she'd be snooping around and telling tales. You better meet someplace else."

"She's right," said Allen. "You'd better come to my place. Can you be there by noon or so?"

The other men agreed to the time and place. They all left the bar together. As they walked through the lobby, Clarence nodded to them.

"Take care, Allen," he said as if he were just making a pleasantry.

Just before Billy drove away in a beatup Cadillac, Wickersham rolled down the passenger window and yelled to Allen, "See you next time, boy!"

"Boy," again. Damn him. He'd show them.

The next Sunday morning Allen kept Jenny in bed until almost noon. She was just making coffee when they heard a loud knock and an unmistakable voice squawking, "Hey, Allen! You in there, boy?"

They had not dressed yet, and Allen tried to get Jenny to answer the door in the nude, to show the men how sophisticated they were. One of his "Beta

Bunnies" had done that to his collector in July, and it had blown the man's mind so bad it was after Labor Day before he quit making up excuses to drop by every weekend.

Jenny just said, "Don't be silly, Allen," jerked on one of his T-shirts, and let the bootleggers in, all of them laughing at Allen as he struggled into his shorts.

The three men sat down around Allen's dinette table. Wickersham drew a roll of cash from his pocket and started to peel off bills.

"You said twenty-six forty would cover what you got in this? Okay. Here it is. That leaves about seventy-three hundred. Me 'n' ol' Billy got about thirteen hundred in sugar, corn, barrels, and a small gift to a friendly sheriff. So there's—say—six thousand to divide. Here's your third."

He counted off another two thousand and gave it to Allen.

"Two thousand dollars," Allen said, holding his profit in his upraised hand. "Not bad for a one week investment of somebody else's money."

Billy laughed, and Wickersham snorted. "Hell. If me and Billy could get going right away, we could turn fifteen thousand into fifty in a month or less. But if we can't do it soon, we'll never make it."

"How's that?" Allen asked.

"If we had that kind of money, we could add more barrels, speed up production, buy a big old truck, and make a real gift to the sheriff. We could make and sell a fifty thousand dollar load and be in and out before Old Perk even knows we're there. When we got in this, we thought my friend Johnson was going to put up most of the cash, but now he's gone missing and here we are with nothing but a few thousand bucks and a few barrels. Even that beatup little truck you helped us get is probably too hot to use again.

"See, you can't build up gradual when you're moonshining around Old Perk's territory. You have to get in and out fast or forget it. I guess it's time for us to forget it."

Allen hated to ask one more naive question, but he had to know. "Who's Old Perk, some kind of federal agent?"

Both older men laughed. Even Jenny giggled, although Allen doubted that she had any more idea who Old Perk was than he did.

"Old Perk," said Billy, "is Adam Perkinson. He's the biggest danged moonshiner on the East Coast."

"He's the biggest in the whole country," said Wickersham. "And the Carolinas are his home territory. He owns it like the mob owns Jersey. And if

you're moonshining in his territory, he'll wipe you out. If you're small, he'll let you alone, not even pay any attention to you. But if you get big enough to make some real money—"He drew his open hand across his throat like a knife.

"How would he wipe you out?" Jenny asked.

Allen noticed they didn't laugh when Jenny asked a question.

"He wouldn't do it himself," Wickersham answered. "He used to have his boys dynamite the still, maybe shoot the stillhands. But he doesn't need to take that kind of chance any more. Now he lets the sheriff do it."

"I thought you were going to buy the sheriff," said Allen.

This time Webb didn't laugh at Allen. He just shook his head sadly and said, "They don't stay bought. If you pay his asking price, he's got to let you get one good load out or nobody will ever do business with him again. But once you've got that one load out, he's up for bids again, and Perk can outbid us every time. Since Johnson is missing and presumed permanently unavailable, we're going to abandon ship, take our meager earnings, and get out of business."

By then Jenny had served sandwiches and coffee all around and joined them at the

table. They ate in a mix of silence and small talk.

"It's been a pleasant meal, Jenny," said Wickersham. "And a pleasant venture, Allen. Now Billy and I need to take our little profit and find something better to do than push small loads of whisky out of a few miserable barrels. And you, my boy, need to get back to helping old ladies buy Chevrolets."

"Wait a minute, Webb," said Allen. "You and Billy have four thousand. You just need eleven thousand more, right?"

Webb shook his head. "No, my boy, we need fifteen. We've made little enough out of this venture. We're not risking what little there is. Unless an angel with fifteen thousand in his wings flies down and gives it to us, we're out of the business."

"Look, old man," said Allen, glancing at Jenny as he tried out a new way to deal with being called boy, "I think I could do it. I could roll that loan we've got on the books now and add three or four more. If you can get a load out in a month, there wouldn't be any problem. I'd want twenty thousand off the top to cover the loans and my trouble. That should leave us ten thousand apiece on a one month investment."

"No," said Wickersham. "You've made your one fast run with the foxes. Go back and

sleep in the hutch where it's safe. I can't be a party to your taking that kind of risk."

"What kind of risk is there really?" asked Allen. "You said the sheriff would have to let you make one good run, and Old Perk doesn't take chances on using violence himself."

"There's always risk in every enterprise, and a lot more in an illegal one," said Wide Webb. "You get strung out on your company's money to the tune of fifteen thousand bucks and something goes wrong, you're done for. That's as much as they pay you in—what—two years?"

"Two and a half," said Allen. "That's why I need the ten thousand I can make in a month on this. Don't worry about me, old man, I can cover my tracks at the company. Let me get you the money and give us all a chance to make a score."

"Yeah, Webb," said Billy. "You ain't his daddy. When you and me was his age, we was already pulling off some pretty good deals."

Jenny had hopped up to get more coffee. She set the pot down, bent over, and grabbed Wickersham by the neck with both hands. She pretended to choke him.

"You give Al a chance to make some money, or you won't get any more coffee," she said.

The fat man hung his tongue

out and made choking sounds. He gasped out, "I give up. I give up. If he wants to take the risk, I want to take the money. Now give me my damned coffee."

By Tuesday evening Allen had it done.

He had paid off the Chevrolet loan and entered on the books three new auto loans and a signatory note in the name of a fictitious doctor. Together the four totaled just over seventeen thousand dollars, with fifteen net to the borrowers. That gave him enough to give his partners what they needed and still have two thousand on hand to make any necessary payments on the loans if the profit was slower than expected.

Wednesday he took Webb, Billy, and Jenny around to three different branch banks to cash out the car loans. He ran the signatory loan proceeds through his own account. That was a little risky, but none of his partners looked enough like a doctor to introduce to a banker as one. Finally he gave Wickersham all the cash in return for the wide one's assurance that he would have fifty thousand in four weeks, thirty days tops.

For twenty days, Allen managed to feel pretty good. By the twenty-fifth he wasn't eating well. By the twenty-eighth he wasn't sleeping at all, worrying all night about what would hap-

pen if Webb and Billy didn't come back.

On the morning of the thirtieth day, well before sunrise, Webb Wickersham did come back. But he didn't have Billy with him, and he didn't have fifty thousand dollars to divide. He came banging on Allen's door, screaming, "Allen, let me in, boy, for God's sake, hurry!"

Allen unlocked the door, and the big man almost knocked him down rushing in. He was flushed and shaking. His breath came in great rasping pants.

"Billy's dead," he blurted out before Allen could speak. "Old Perk came in with a bunch of men while we were loading. I was off in the woods, and I hid, but they shot Billy and a black guy we had helping us load. Blew the bodies up with the still, so the sheriff won't even call it murder. Just say two still-hands got blown up with their still."

Webb's voice choked off into sobs for a moment. Allen was too shocked even to speak.

Finally he said, "What am I going to do, Webb? I've lost fifteen thousand dollars of the company's money."

"To hell with money, boy. Billy's dead, and Perk's liable to kill me if he figures out that I'm in on it. You're lucky. Perk doesn't know you. I've got a thou left. Half of it's yours. I'll need the

rest to run on." He handed Allen five hundred-dollar bills and patted him on the shoulder. "I've got to put some miles between me and Ol' Perk. If you keep rolling those loans over, you'll be okay in time."

He was gone as fast as he'd come.

A few hours later Allen called the office and told Sherry he was sick. She offered to close the office to come take care of him, but he ordered her not to, telling her he would be going to a doctor. Instead, he spent the day figuring.

With what Webb had given him and what he had held out of the loan proceeds, he had just enough to pay off the signatory loan and make payments on the car loans for a couple of months. If he sold his car and his equity in the cottage, he could pay off one more loan. Then he could move to a ratty apartment in town, walk to work, and by living like a miser afford payments on the other two loans.

If he did all that, and it all worked as he planned, he could pay the last two loans off in three years. Even then there was the risk that someone in the company would learn of his change in lifestyle, pull a full audit on his office, and have him prosecuted for fraud or embezzlement. Even a routine audit could do it, especially if



someone noticed that four recent loans all had post office box addresses.

If he rolled the loans occasionally, he could spread the payments, but the new carrying charges would make his balance bigger and leave him exposed longer. The sooner he could get the loans off the books, the better his chances of surviving undetected. He had a desperate idea. He would marry Jenny.

Not only would such a marriage give him her earnings to add to his and hurry the payout, but he thought he could cut expenses that way. He knew two couldn't really live as cheaply as one, but he figured half of two lives more cheaply than one living alone, especially since Jenny had a little efficiency apartment at the motel that Clarence let her live in dirt cheap. Allen could move in with her cheaper than anywhere he could find by himself. He drove to the Inn to tell her about Webb and Billy and start selling her on the marriage idea. But as he dashed through the lobby, Clarence called out to him. "If you're looking for Jenny, she don't work here any more."

"She, uh, she . . . you fired her?" Allen stammered.

"No," said Clarence. "I didn't fire her. She just up and quit.

Come in here an hour before her shift was supposed to start and drew her pay. I had to call Maggie James in without warning. Had to pay her overtime to get her to come. You know any girl looking for a job?"

"No," said Allen. "Did Jenny say where she was going?"

"Said she was going back home," said Clarence. "But I don't believe her. I think she's taking off with Webb Wickersham."

Allen tried to sound uninterested. "Why would she leave with that ugly lump of lard?" he asked.

Clarence snorted. "No man's ugly to that little chickie when he's got a wad of money on his hip."

Allen would at least show Clarence he knew something about running with the foxes. He forced himself to laugh as he said, "Webb hasn't got any money. Ol' Perk blew up his still and killed his partner."

"His still!" Clarence hooted. "He ain't never had a still. That hasn't kept him from selling part interest in one to suckers all up and down the East Coast, but he ain't never had one."

It dawned on Allen for the first time that when foxes feast they must always invite one rabbit.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The Jew's Breastplate Arthur Conan Doyle

**M**y particular friend, Ward Mortimer, was one of the best men of his day at everything connected with Oriental archæology. He had written largely upon the subject, he had lived two years in a tomb at Thebes while he excavated in the Valley of the Kings, and finally he had created a considerable sensation by his exhumation of the alleged mummy of Cleopatra in the inner room of the Temple of Horus at Philæ. With such a record at the age of thirty-one, it was felt that a considerable career lay before him, and no one was surprised when he was elected to the curatorship of the Belmore Street Museum, which carries with it the lectureship at the Oriental College and an income which has sunk with the fall in land but which still remains at that ideal sum which is large enough to encourage an investigator but not so large as to enervate him.

There was only one reason which made Ward Mortimer's position a little difficult at the Belmore Street Museum, and that was the extreme eminence of the man whom he had to succeed. Professor Andreas was a profound scholar and a man of European reputation. His lectures were frequented by students from every part of the world, and his admirable management of the collection entrusted to his care was a commonplace in all learned societies. There was, therefore, considerable surprise when, at the age of fifty-five, he suddenly resigned his position and retired from those duties which had been both his livelihood and his pleasure. He and his daughter left the comfortable suite of rooms which had formed his official residence in connection with the museum, and my friend Mortimer, who was a bachelor, took up his quarters there.

On hearing of Mortimer's appointment Professor Andreas had written him a very kindly and flattering congratulatory letter. I was actually present at their first meeting, and I went with Mortimer round the museum when the professor showed us the admirable collection which he had cherished so long. The professor's beautiful daughter and a young man, Captain Wilson, who was, as I understood, soon to be her husband, accompanied us in our inspection. There were fifteen rooms, but the Babylonian, the Syrian, and the central hall, which contained the Jewish and Egyptian collection, were the finest of all. Professor Andreas was a quiet, dry, elderly man, with a clean-shaven face and an impassive manner, but his dark eyes sparkled and his features quickened into enthu-

siastic life as he pointed out to us the rarity and the beauty of some of his specimens. His hand lingered so fondly over them that one could read his pride in them and the grief in his heart now that they were passing from his care into that of another.

He had shown us in turn his mummies, his papyri, his rare scarabs, his inscriptions, his Jewish relics, and his duplication of the famous seven-branched candlestick of the Temple, which was brought to Rome by Titus and which is supposed by some to be lying at this instant in the bed of the Tiber. Then he approached a case which stood in the very center of the hall, and he looked down through the glass with reverence in his attitude and manner.

"This is no novelty to an expert like yourself, Mr. Mortimer," said he; "but I daresay that your friend, Mr. Jackson, will be interested to see it."

Leaning over the case I saw an object, some five inches square, which consisted of twelve precious stones in a framework of gold, with golden hooks at two of the corners. The stones were all varying in sort and color, but they were of the same size. Their shapes, arrangement, and gradation of tint made me think of a box of water-color paints. Each stone had some hieroglyphic scratched upon its surface.

"You have heard, Mr. Jackson, of the urim and thummim?"

I had heard the term, but my idea of its meaning was exceedingly vague.

"The urim and thummim was a name given to the jeweled plate which lay upon the breast of the high priest of the Jews. They had a very special feeling of reverence for it—something of the feeling which an ancient Roman might have for the Sibylline books in the Capitol. There are, as you see, twelve magnificent stones, inscribed with mystical characters. Counting from the left-hand top corner, the stones are carnelian, peridot, emerald, ruby, lapis lazuli, onyx, sapphire, agate, amethyst, topaz, beryl, and jasper."

I was amazed at the variety and beauty of the stones.

"Has the breastplate any particular history?" I asked.

"It is of great age and of immense value," said Professor Andreas. "Without being able to make an absolute assertion, we have many reasons to think that it is possible that it may be the original urim and thummim of Solomon's Temple. There is certainly nothing so fine in any collection in Europe. My friend Captain Wilson here is a practical authority upon precious stones, and he would tell you how pure these are."

Captain Wilson, a man with a dark, hard, incisive face, was standing beside his fiancée at the other side of the case.

"Yes," said he curtly, "I have never seen finer stones."

"And the gold work is also worthy of attention. The ancients excelled in—" he was apparently about to indicate the setting of the stones when Captain Wilson interrupted him.

"You will see a finer example of their gold work in this candlestick," said he, turning to another table, and we all joined him in his admiration of its embossed stem and delicately ornamented branches. Altogether it was an interesting and a novel experience to have objects of such rarity explained by so great an expert; and when, finally, Professor Andreas finished our inspection by formally handing over the precious collection to the care of my friend, I could not help pitying him and envying his successor whose life was to pass in so pleasant a duty. Within a week Ward Mortimer was duly installed in his new set of rooms and had become the autocrat of the Belmore Street Museum.

About a fortnight afterwards my friend gave a small dinner to half a dozen bachelor friends to celebrate his promotion. When his guests were departing he pulled my sleeve and signaled to me that he wished me to remain.

"You have only a few hundred yards to go," said he—I was living in chambers in the Albany. "You may as well stay and have a quiet cigar with me. I very much want your advice."

I relapsed into an armchair and lit one of his excellent Matronas. When he had returned from seeing the last of his guests out, he drew a letter from his dress-jacket and sat down opposite to me.

"This is an anonymous letter which I received this morning," said he. "I want to read it to you and to have your advice."

"You are very welcome to it for what it is worth."

"This is how the note runs: 'Sir,—I should strongly advise you to keep a very careful watch over the many valuable things which are committed to your charge. I do not think that the present system of a single watchman is sufficient. Be upon your guard, or an irreparable misfortune may occur.'"

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all."

"Well," said I, "it is at least obvious that it was written by one of the limited number of people who are aware that you have only one watchman at night."

Ward Mortimer handed me the note with a curious smile. "Have

you an eye for handwriting?" said he. "Now, look at this!" He put another letter in front of me. "Look at the c in 'congratulate' and the c in 'committed.' Look at the capital I. Look at the trick of putting in a dash instead of a stop!"

"They are undoubtedly from the same hand—with some attempt at disguise in the case of this first one."

"The second," said Ward Mortimer, "is the letter of congratulation which was written to me by Professor Andreas upon my obtaining my appointment."

I stared at him in amazement. Then I turned over the letter in my hand, and there, sure enough, was "Martin Andreas" signed upon the other side. There could be no doubt in the mind of anyone who had the slightest knowledge of the science of graphology that the professor had written an anonymous letter, warning his successor against thieves. It was inexplicable, but it was certain.

"Why should he do it?" I asked.

"Precisely what I should wish to ask you. If he had any such misgivings, why could he not come and tell me direct?"

"Will you speak to him about it?"

"There again I am in doubt. He might choose to deny that he wrote it."

"At any rate," said I, "this warning is meant in a friendly spirit, and I should certainly act upon it. Are the present precautions enough to ensure you against robbery?"

"I should have thought so. The public are only admitted from ten till five, and there is a guardian to every two rooms. He stands at the door between them, and so commands them both."

"But at night?"

"When the public are gone, we at once put up the great iron shutters, which are absolutely burglarproof. The watchman is a capable fellow. He sits in the lodge, but he walks round every three hours. We keep one electric light burning in each room all night."

"It is difficult to suggest anything more—short of keeping your day watches all night."

"We could not afford that."

"At least I should communicate with the police and have a special constable put on outside in Belmore Street," said I. "As to the letter, if the writer wishes to be anonymous, I think he has a right to remain so. We must trust to the future to show some reason for the curious course which he has adopted."

So we dismissed the subject, but all that night after my return to

my chambers I was puzzling my brain as to what possible motive Professor Andreas could have for writing an anonymous warning letter to his successor—for that the writing was his was as certain to me as if I had seen him actually doing it. He foresaw some danger to the collection. Was it because he foresaw it that he abandoned his charge of it? But if so, why should he hesitate to warn Mortimer in his own name? I puzzled and puzzled until at last I fell into a troubled sleep, which carried me beyond my usual hour of rising.

I was aroused in a singular and effective method, for about nine o'clock my friend Mortimer rushed into my room with an expression of consternation upon his face. He was usually one of the most tidy men of my acquaintance, but now his collar was undone at one end, his tie was flying, and his hat at the back of his head. I read his whole story in his frantic eyes.

"The museum has been robbed!" I cried, springing up in bed.

"I fear so! Those jewels! The jewels of the urim and thummim!" he gasped, for he was out of breath with running. "I'm going on to the police station. Come to the museum as soon as you can, Jackson! Goodbye!" He rushed distractedly out of the room, and I heard him clatter down the stairs.

I was not long in following his directions, but I found when I arrived that he had already returned with a police inspector and another elderly gentleman, who proved to be Mr. Purvis, one of the partners of Morson and Company, the well-known diamond merchants. As an expert in stones he was always prepared to advise the police. They were grouped round the case in which the breastplate of the Jewish priest had been exposed. The plate had been taken out and laid upon the glass top of the case, and the three heads were bent over it.

"It is obvious that it has been tampered with," said Mortimer. "It caught my eye the moment that I passed through the room this morning. I examined it yesterday evening, so that it is certain that this has happened during the night."

It was, as he had said, obvious that someone had been at work upon it. The settings of the uppermost row of four stones—the carnelian, peridot, emerald, and ruby—were rough and jagged as if someone had scraped all round them. The stones were in their places, but the beautiful gold work which we had admired only a few days before had been very clumsily pulled about.



"It looks to me," said the police inspector, "as if someone had been trying to take out the stones."

"My fear is," said Mortimer, "that he not only tried but succeeded. I believe these four stones to be skillful imitations which have been put in the place of the originals."

The same suspicion had evidently been in the mind of the expert, for he had been carefully examining the four stones with the aid of a lens. He now submitted them to several tests and finally turned cheerfully to Mortimer.

"I congratulate you, sir," said he, heartily. "I will pledge my reputation that all four of these stones are genuine, and of a most unusual degree of purity."

The color began to come back to my poor friend's frightened face, and he drew a long breath of relief.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Then what in the world did the thief want?"

"Probably he meant to take the stones but was interrupted."

"In that case one would expect him to take them out one at a time, but the setting of each of these has been loosened, and yet the stones are all here."

"It is certainly most extraordinary," said the inspector. "I never remember a case like it. Let us see the watchman."

The commissionaire was called—a soldierly, honest-faced man who seemed as concerned as Ward Mortimer at the incident.

"No, sir, I never heard a sound," he answered in reply to the questions of the inspector. "I made my rounds four times, as usual, but I saw nothing suspicious. I've been in my position ten years, but nothing of the kind has ever occurred before."

"No thief could have come through the windows?"

"Impossible, sir."

"Or passed you at the door?"

"No, sir; I never left my post except when I walked my rounds."

"What other openings are there in the museum?"

"There is the door into Mr. Ward Mortimer's private rooms."

"That is locked at night," my friend explained, "and in order to reach it, anyone from the street would have to open the outside door as well."

"Your servants?"

"Their quarters are entirely separate."

"Well, well," said the inspector, "this is certainly very obscure. However, there has been no harm done, according to Mr. Purvis."

"I will swear that those stones are genuine."

"So that the case appears to be merely one of malicious damage. But nonetheless, I should be very glad to go carefully round the premises and to see if we can find any trace to show us who your visitor may have been."

His investigation, which lasted all the morning, was careful and intelligent, but it led in the end to nothing. He pointed out to us that there were two possible entrances to the museum which we had not considered. The one was from the cellars by a trapdoor opening in the passage. The other through a skylight from the lumber room, overlooking that very chamber to which the intruder had penetrated. As neither the cellar nor the lumber room could be entered unless the thief was already within the locked doors, the matter was not of any practical importance, and the dust of cellar and attic assured us that no one had used either one or the other. Finally, we ended as we began, without the slightest clue as to how, why, or by whom the setting of these four jewels had been tampered with.

There remained one course for Mortimer to take, and he took it. Leaving the police to continue their fruitless researches, he asked me to accompany him that afternoon in a visit to Professor Andreas. He took with him the two letters, and it was his intention to openly tax his predecessor with having written the anonymous warning and to ask him to explain the fact that he should have anticipated so exactly that which had actually occurred. The professor was living in a small villa in Upper Norwood, but we were informed by the servant that he was away from home. Seeing our disappointment, she asked us if we should like to see Miss Andreas, and showed us into the modest drawing room.

I have mentioned incidentally that the professor's daughter was a very beautiful girl. She was a blonde, tall and graceful, with a skin of that delicate tint which the French call "mat," the color of old ivory, or of the lighter petals of the sulphur rose. I was shocked, however, as she entered the room to see how much she had changed in the last fortnight. Her young face was haggard and her bright eyes heavy with trouble.

"Father has gone to Scotland," she said. "He seems to be tired, and has had a good deal to worry him. He only left us yesterday."

"You look a little tired yourself, Miss Andreas," said my friend.

"I have been so anxious about Father."

"Can you give me his Scotch address?"

"Yes, he is with his brother, the Reverend David Andreas, 1 Arran Villas, Ardrossan."

Ward Mortimer made a note of the address, and we left without saying anything as to the object of our visit. We found ourselves in Belmore Street in the evening in exactly the same position in which we had been in the morning. Our only clue was the professor's letter, and my friend had made up his mind to start for Ardrossan next day and to get to the bottom of the anonymous letter when a new development came to alter our plans.

Very early on the following morning I was aroused from my sleep by a tap upon my bedroom door. It was a messenger with a note from Mortimer.

"Do come round," it said; "the matter is becoming more and more extraordinary."

When I obeyed his summons, I found him pacing excitedly up and down the central room while the old soldier who guarded the premises stood with military stiffness in a corner.

"My dear Jackson," he cried, "I am so delighted that you have come, for this is a most inexplicable business."

"What has happened, then?"

He waved his hand towards the case which contained the breastplate.

"Look at it," said he.

I did so and could not restrain a cry of surprise. The setting of the middle row of precious stones had been profaned in the same manner as the upper ones. Of the twelve jewels, eight had been now tampered with in this singular fashion. The setting of the lower four was neat and smooth. The others jagged and irregular.

"Have the stones been altered?" I asked.

"No, I am certain that these upper four are the same which the expert pronounced to be genuine, for I observed yesterday that little discoloration on the edge of the emerald. Since they have not extracted the upper stones, there is no reason to think the lower have been transposed. You say that you heard nothing, Simpson?"

"No, sir," the commissionaire answered. "But when I made my round after daylight I had a special look at these stones, and I saw at once that someone had been meddling with them. Then I called you, sir, and told you. I was backwards and forwards all night, and I never saw a soul or heard a sound."

"Come up and have some breakfast with me," said Mortimer, and

he took me into his own chambers. "Now, what *do* you think of this, Jackson?" he asked.

"It is the most objectless, futile, idiotic business that ever I heard of. It can only be the work of a monomaniac."

"Can you put forward any theory?"

A curious idea came into my head. "This object is a Jewish relic of great antiquity and sanctity," said I. "How about the antisemitic movement? Could one conceive that a fanatic of that way of thinking might desecrate—"

"No, no, no!" cried Mortimer. "That will never do! Such a man might push his lunacy to the length of destroying a Jewish relic, but why on earth should he nibble round every stone so carefully that he can only do four stones in a night? We must have a better solution than that, and we must find it for ourselves, for I do not think that our inspector is likely to help us. First of all, what do you think of Simpson, the porter?"

"Have you any reason to suspect him?"

"Only that he is the one person on the premises."

"But why should he indulge in such wanton destruction? Nothing has been taken away. He has no motive."

"Mania?"

"No, I will swear to his sanity."

"Have you any other theory?"

"Well, yourself, for example. You are not a somnambulist, by any chance?"

"Nothing of the sort, I assure you."

"Then I give it up."

"But I don't—and I have a plan by which we will make it all clear."

"To visit Professor Andreas?"

"No, we shall find our solution nearer than Scotland. I will tell you what we shall do. You know that skylight which overlooks the central hall? We will leave the electric lights in the hall, and we will keep watch in the lumber room, you and I, and solve the mystery for ourselves. If our mysterious visitor is doing four stones at a time, he has four still to do, and there is every reason to think that he will return tonight and complete the job."

"Excellent!" I cried.

"We will keep our own secret and say nothing either to the police or to Simpson. Will you join me?"

"With the utmost pleasure," said I, and so it was agreed.

It was ten o'clock that night when I returned to the Belmore Street Museum. Mortimer was, as I could see, in a state of suppressed nervous excitement, but it was still too early to begin our vigil, so we remained for an hour or so in his chambers, discussing all the possibilities of the singular business which we had met to solve. At last the roaring stream of hansom cabs and the rush of hurrying feet became lower and more intermittent as the pleasure-seekers passed on their way to their stations or their homes. It was nearly twelve when Mortimer led the way to the lumber room which overlooked the central hall of the museum.

He had visited it during the day, and had spread some sacking so that we could lie at our ease, and look straight down into the museum. The skylight was of unfrosted glass but was so covered with dust that it would be impossible for anyone looking up from below to detect that he was overlooked. We cleared a small piece at each corner, which gave us a complete view of the room beneath us. In the cold white light of the electric lamps everything stood out hard and clear, and I could see the smallest detail of the contents of the various cases.

Such a vigil is an excellent lesson, since one has no choice but to look hard at those objects which we usually pass with such half-hearted interest. Through my little peephole I employed the hours in studying every specimen, from the huge mummy case which leaned against the wall to those very jewels which had brought us there, gleaming and sparkling in their glass case immediately beneath us. There was much precious gold work and many valuable stones scattered through the numerous cases, but those wonderful twelve which made up the urim and thummim glowed and burned with a radiance which far eclipsed the others. I studied in turn the tomb pictures of Sicara, the friezes from Karnak, the statues of Memphis, and the inscriptions of Thebes, but my eyes would always come back to that wonderful Jewish relic, and my mind to the singular mystery which surrounded it. I was lost in the thought of it when my companion suddenly drew his breath sharply in and seized my arm in a convulsive grip. At the same instant I saw what it was which had excited him.

I have said that against the wall—on the right-hand side of the doorway (the right-hand side as we looked at it, but the left as one entered)—there stood a large mummy case. To our unutterable amazement it was slowly opening. Gradually, gradually the lid was swinging back, and the black slit which marked the opening was

becoming wider and wider. So gently and carefully was it done that the movement was almost imperceptible. Then, as we breathlessly watched it, a white thin hand appeared at the opening, pushing back the painted lid, then another hand, and finally a face—a face which was familiar to us both, that of Professor Andreas. Stealthily he slunk out of the mummy case, like a fox stealing from its burrow, his head turning incessantly to left and to right, stepping, then pausing, then stepping again, the very image of craft and of caution. Once some sound in the street struck him motionless, and he stood listening, with his ear turned, ready to dart back to the shelter behind him. Then he crept onwards again upon tiptoe, very, very softly and slowly, until he had reached the case in the center of the room. There he took a bunch of keys from his pocket, unlocked the case, took out the Jewish breastplate, and, laying it upon the glass in front of him, began to work upon it with some sort of small, glistening tool. He was so directly underneath us that his bent head covered his work, but we could guess from the movement of his hand that he was engaged in finishing the strange disfigurement which he had begun.

I could realize from the heavy breathing of my companion, and the twitchings of the hand which still clutched my wrist, the furious indignation which filled his heart as he saw this vandalism in the quarter of all others where he could least have expected it. He, the very man who a fortnight before had reverently bent over this unique relic, and who had impressed its antiquity and its sanctity upon us, was now engaged in this outrageous profanation. It was impossible, unthinkable—and yet there, in the white glare of the electric light beneath us, was that dark figure with the bent grey head and the twitching elbow. What inhuman hypocrisy, what hateful depth of malice against his successor must underlie these sinister nocturnal labors. It was painful to think of and dreadful to watch. Even I, who had none of the acute feelings of a virtuoso, could not bear to look on and see this deliberate mutilation of so ancient a relic. It was a relief to me when my companion tugged at my sleeve as a signal that I was to follow him as he softly crept out of the room. It was not until we were within his own quarters that he opened his lips, and then I saw by his agitated face how deep was his consternation.

"The abominable Goth!" he cried. "Could you have believed it?"

"It is amazing."

"He is a villain or a lunatic—one or the other. We shall very soon

see which. Come with me, Jackson, and we shall get to the bottom of this black business."

A door opened out of the passage which was the private entrance from his rooms into the museum. This he opened softly with his key, having first kicked off his shoes, an example which I followed. We crept together through room after room, until the large hall lay before us, with that dark figure still stooping and working at the central case. With an advance as cautious as his own we closed in upon him, but softly as we went we could not take him entirely un-awares. We were still a dozen yards from him when he looked round with a start and, uttering a husky cry of terror, ran frantically down the museum.

"Simpson! Simpson!" roared Mortimer, and far away down the vista of electric lighted doors we saw the stiff figure of the old soldier suddenly appear. Professor Andreas saw him also and stopped running, with a gesture of despair. At the same instant we each laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Yes, yes, gentlemen," he panted, "I will come with you. To your rooms, Mr. Ward Mortimer, if you please! I feel that I owe you an explanation."

My companion's indignation was so great that I could see that he dared not trust himself to reply. We walked on each side of the old professor, the astonished commissioner bringing up the rear. When we reached the violated case, Mortimer stopped and examined the breastplate. Already one of the stones of the lower row had had its setting turned back in the same manner as the others. My friend held it up and glanced furiously at his prisoner.

"How could you!" he cried. "How could you!"

"It is horrible—horrible!" said the professor. "I don't wonder at your feelings. Take me to your room."

"But this shall not be left exposed!" cried Mortimer. He picked the breastplate up and carried it tenderly in his hand, while I walked beside the professor, like a policeman with a malefactor.

We passed into Mortimer's chambers, leaving the amazed old soldier to understand matters as best he could. The professor sat down in Mortimer's armchair, and turned so ghastly a color that for the instant all our resentment was changed to concern. A stiff glass of brandy brought the life back to him once more.

"There, I am better now!" said he. "These last few days have been too much for me. I am convinced that I could not stand it any longer. It is a nightmare—a horrible nightmare—that I should be



arrested as a burglar in what has been for so long my own museum. And yet I cannot blame you. You could not have done otherwise. My hope always was that I should get it all over before I was detected. This would have been my last night's work."

"How did you get in?" asked Mortimer.

"By taking a very great liberty with your private door. But the object justified it. The object justified everything. You will not be angry when you know everything—at least, you will not be angry with me. I had a key to your side door and also to the museum door. I did not give them up when I left. And so you see it was not difficult for me to let myself into the museum. I used to come in early before the crowd had cleared from the street. Then I hid myself in the mummy case, and took refuge there whenever Simpson came round. I could always hear him coming. I used to leave in the same way as I came."

"You ran a risk."

"I had to."

"But why? What on earth was your object—you to do a thing like that!" Mortimer pointed reproachfully at the plate which lay before him on the table.

"I could devise no other means. I thought and thought, but there was no alternate except a hideous public scandal and a private sorrow which would have clouded our lives. I acted for the best, incredible as it may seem to you, and I only ask your attention to enable me to prove it."

"I will hear what you have to say before I take any further steps," said Mortimer grimly.

"I am determined to hold back nothing and to take you both completely into my confidence. I will leave it to your own generosity how far you will use the facts with which I supply you."

"We have the essential facts already."

"And yet you understand nothing. Let me go back to what passed a few weeks ago, and I will make it all clear to you. Believe me that what I say is the absolute and exact truth."

"You have met the person who calls himself Captain Wilson. I say 'calls himself' because I have reason now to believe that it is not his correct name. It would take me too long if I were to describe all the means by which he obtained an introduction to me and ingratiated himself into my friendship and the affection of my daughter. He brought letters from foreign colleagues which compelled me to show him some attention. And then, by his own attainments, which are

considerable, he succeeded in making himself a very welcome visitor at my rooms. When I learned that my daughter's affections had been gained by him, I may have thought it premature, but I certainly was not surprised, for he had a charm of manner and of conversation which would have made him conspicuous in any society.

"He was much interested in Oriental antiquities, and his knowledge of the subject justified his interest. Often when he spent the evening with us he would ask permission to go down into the museum and have an opportunity of privately inspecting the various specimens. You can imagine that I, as an enthusiast, was in sympathy with such a request, and that I felt no surprise at the constancy of his visits. After his actual engagement to Elise, there was hardly an evening which he did not pass with us, and an hour or two were generally devoted to the museum. He had the free run of the place, and when I have been away for the evening I had no objection to his doing whatever he wished here. This state of things was only terminated by the fact of my resignation of my official duties and my retirement to Norwood, where I hoped to have the leisure to write a considerable work which I had planned.

"It was immediately after this—within a week or so—that I first realized the true nature and character of the man whom I had so imprudently introduced into my family. The discovery came to me through letters from my friends abroad, which showed me that his introductions to me had been forgeries. Aghast at the revelation, I asked myself what motive this man could originally have had in practicing this elaborate deception upon me. I was too poor a man for any fortune-hunter to have marked me down. Why, then, had he come? I remembered that some of the most precious gems in Europe had been under my charge, and I remembered also the ingenious excuses by which this man had made himself familiar with the cases in which they were kept. He was a rascal who was planning some gigantic robbery. How could I, without striking my own daughter, who was infatuated about him, prevent him from carrying out any plan which he might have formed? My device was a clumsy one, and yet I could think of nothing more effective. If I had written a letter under my own name, you would naturally have turned to me for details which I did not wish to give. I resorted to an anonymous letter, begging you to be upon your guard.

"I may tell you that my change from Belmore Street to Norwood had not affected the visits of this man, who had, I believe, a real and overpowering affection for my daughter. As to her, I could not

have believed that any woman could be so completely under the influence of a man as she was. His stronger nature seemed to entirely dominate her. I had not realized how far this was the case, or the extent of the confidence which existed between them, until that very evening when his true character for the first time was made clear to me. I had given orders that when he called he should be shown into my study instead of to the drawing room. There I told him bluntly that I knew all about him, that I had taken steps to defeat his designs, and that neither I nor my daughter desired ever to see him again. I added that I thanked God that I had found him out before he had time to harm those precious objects which it had been the work of my lifetime to protect.

"He was certainly a man of iron nerve. He took my remarks without a sign either of surprise or of defiance, but listened gravely and attentively until I had finished. Then he walked across the room without a word and struck the bell.

"'Ask Miss Andreas to be so kind as to step this way,' said he to the servant.

"My daughter entered, and the man closed the door behind her. Then he took her hand in his.

"'Elise,' said he, 'your father has just discovered that I am a villain. He knows now what you knew before.'

"She stood in silence, listening.

"'He says that we are to part forever,' said he.

"She did not withdraw her hand.

"'Will you be true to me, or will you remove the last good influence which is ever likely to come into my life?'

"'John,' she cried passionately. 'I will never abandon you! Never, never, not if the whole world were against you.'

"In vain I argued and pleaded with her. It was absolutely useless. Her whole life was bound up in this man before me. My daughter, gentlemen, is all that I have left to love, and it filled me with agony when I saw how powerless I was to save her from her ruin. My helplessness seemed to touch this man who was the cause of my trouble.

"'It may not be as bad as you think, sir,' said he, in his quiet, inflexible way. 'I love Elise with a love which is strong enough to rescue even one who has such a record as I have. It was but yesterday that I promised her that never again in my whole life would I do a thing of which she should be ashamed. I have made up my mind to

it, and never yet did I make up my mind to a thing which I did not do.'

"He spoke with an air which carried conviction with it. As he concluded he put his hand into his pocket and he drew out a small cardboard box.

"I am about to give you a proof of my determination,' said he. 'This, Elise, shall be the first-fruits of your redeeming influence over me. You are right, sir, in thinking that I had designs upon the jewels in your possession. Such ventures have had a charm for me, which depended as much upon the risk run as upon the value of the prize. Those famous and antique stones of the Jewish priest were a challenge to my daring and my ingenuity. I determined to get them.'

"I guessed as much.'

"There was only one thing that you did not guess.'

"And what is that?"

"That I got them. They are in this box.'

"He opened the box, and tilted out the contents upon the corner of my desk. My hair rose and my flesh grew cold as I looked. There were twelve magnificent square stones engraved with mystical characters. There could be no doubt that they were the jewels of the urim and thummim.

"'Good God!' I cried. 'How have you escaped discovery?"

"By the substitution of twelve others, made especially to my order, in which the originals are so carefully imitated that I defy the eye to detect the difference.'

"Then the present stones are false?" I cried.

"They have been for some weeks.'

"We all stood in silence, my daughter white with emotion but still holding this man by the hand.

"You see what I am capable of, Elise,' said he.

"I see that you are capable of repentance and restitution,' she answered.

"Yes, thanks to your influence! I leave the stones in your hands, sir. Do what you like about it. But remember that whatever you do against me is done against the future husband of your only daughter. You will hear from me soon again, Elise: It is the last time that I will ever cause pain to your tender heart,' and with these words he left both the room and the house.

"My position was a dreadful one. Here I was with these precious relics in my possession, and how could I return them without a

scandal and an exposure? I knew the depth of my daughter's nature too well to suppose that I would ever be able to detach her from this man now that she had entirely given him her heart. I was not even sure how far it was right to detach her if she had such an ameliorating influence over him. How could I expose him without injuring her—and how far was I justified in exposing him when he had voluntarily put himself into my power? I thought and thought until at last I formed a resolution which may seem to you to be a foolish one, and yet, if I had to do it again, I believe it would be the best course open to me.

"My idea was to return the stones without anyone being the wiser. With my keys I could get into the museum at any time, and I was confident that I could avoid Simpson, whose hours and methods were familiar to me. I determined to take no one into my confidence—not even my daughter—whom I told that I was about to visit my brother in Scotland. I wanted a free hand for a few nights without inquiry as to my comings and goings. To this end I took a room in Harding Street that very night, with an intimation that I was a pressman, and that I should keep very late hours.

"That night I made my way into the museum, and I replaced four of the stones. It was hard work, and took me all night. When Simpson came round I always heard his footsteps and concealed myself in the mummy case. I had some knowledge of gold work, but was far less skillful than the thief had been. He had replaced the setting so exactly that I defy anyone to see the difference. My work was rude and clumsy. However, I hoped that the plate might not be carefully examined, or the roughness of the setting observed, until my task was done. Next night I replaced four more stones. And tonight I should have finished my task had it not been for the unfortunate circumstance which has caused me to reveal so much which I should have wished to keep concealed. I appeal to you, gentlemen, to your sense of honor and of compassion, whether what I have told you should go any farther or not. My own happiness, my daughter's future, the hopes of this man's regeneration, all depend upon your decision."

"Which is," said my friend, "that all is well that ends well and that the whole matter ends here and at once. Tomorrow the loose settings shall be tightened by an expert goldsmith, and so passes the greatest danger to which, since the destruction of the Temple, the urim and thummim has been exposed. Here is my hand, Professor Andreas, and I can only hope that under such difficult cir-

cumstances I should have carried myself as unselfishly and as well."

Just one footnote to this narrative. Within a month Elise Andreas was married to a man whose name, had I the indiscretion to mention it, would appeal to my readers as one who is now widely and deservedly honored. But if the truth were known, that honor is due not to him but to the gentle girl who plucked him back when he had gone so far down that dark road along which few return.

(continued from page 4)

for his story "Enigma" (AHMM, December 1995), and cheered when S. J. Rozan, another AHMM author, won the Shamus for Best Private Eye Novel of 1995 with *Concourse*.

We haven't space to list the nominees for the Anthony and Shamus awards, but here are the winners:

BEST NOVEL (Anthony): Mary Willis Walker, *Under the Beetle's Cellar* (Doubleday). BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL: the Anthony went to Harlan Coben, *Deal Breaker* (Dell) and the Shamus to William Jaspersohn, *Native Angels* (Bantam). BEST FIRST NOVEL: the Anthony went to Virginia Lanier, *Death in Bloodhound Red* (Pineapple Press) and the Shamus to Richard Barre, *The Innocents* (Walker). BEST SHORT STORY (both awards): Gar Anthony Hay-

wood, "And Pray Nobody Sees You," *Spooks, Spies & Private Eyes* (Doubleday).

The following additional Anthony awards were also presented:

BEST SHORT STORY COLLECTION: *The McCone Files* by Marcia Muller (Crippen & Landru); BEST CRITICAL WORK: *The Armchair Detective Book of Lists, 2nd edition*, edited by Kate Stine (Otto Penzler Books); BEST TRUE CRIME: *Dead by Sunset* by Ann Rule (Simon & Schuster); BEST MAGAZINE: *The Armchair Detective* (hmm); BEST COVER ART: *The Body in the Transept* by Jeanne Dams (Walker); BEST PUBLISHER: St. Martin's; BEST EDITOR: Sara Ann Freed, Mysterious Press (hmm again); BEST TV SHOW: *The X-Files*; BEST MOVIE: *The Usual Suspects*.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



If you're looking for a contemporary whodunit with a British setting, an engaging detective, and a devilishly clever plot, then sniff out Peter Lovesey's **Bloodhounds** (Mysterious Press, \$22) at your nearest bookstore. At the same time that the entire Bath police department is hunting a cagey half-million-dollar diamond thief, Peter Diamond and his homicide squad are faced with the murder of a member of the Bloodhounds, a small mystery readers' book group. That gives Peter and his band their own devilish puzzle: the group's shyest member was found dead on the houseboat of another member who has the key in his pocket and an unbreakable alibi. This one has it all: eccentric characters, witty dialogue, and a trove of throwaway lines about mystery lore.

Gar Anthony Haywood's **Bad News Travels Fast** (Berkley, \$5.99) is the second book starring Joe and Dottie Loudermilk, a spunky African-American couple and the parents of five grown children who (with one exception, their lawyer-daughter) are spending their adult lives reprising Peter Pan. This literally drives their sane and solid parents into early retirement and cross-country flight in a gleaming silver Airstream trailer. Now they're in Washington, D.C., ready to live out Joe's dream of exploring all the national treasures—that is, until Dottie gets maternal and looks up her youngest, their pacifist son. Before they visit even a single tourist site, they're off on a dangerous murder investigation to clear their baby boy of murder. Haywood's narrator Dottie and her husband make witty and wonderful traveling companions.

Teal Stewart is a highly paid financial expert at a prestigious Boston firm and the hero of J. Dayne Lamb's **Unquestioned Loyalty** (Kensington, \$4.99). As she doggedly climbs the corporate lad-



der to a partnership at her firm, she's caught up in a web of fiscal finaglings, office politics, and murderous power plays. Beginning with the apparent bludgeoning death of a familiar local street character outside her office building, events escalate. But how are they connected, these deaths and attempted murder? You'll need a scorecard to separate the petty office schemers from the killer, and even Teal has to go back decades to connect the final dots in the picture. This insider's look into the high-powered corporate culture is scary even without the shadow of a murderer!

Who can resist a title like Kathleen Taylor's **Sex and Salmonella?** (Avon, \$5.50) Tory, who lives "in a small town in a big empty state" (South Dakota), is generously built and generally goodnatured, always ready with a quip and a wisecrack. She's not so fast on the draw when it comes to volunteering to help with the myriad good works and social functions of her town, but she can rarely come up with a definitive no, either. That's how she finds herself with a handful of someone else's small children at a carnival where she trips over a dead body in the spook house. Readers who like witty first-person adventures with a wacky bent should appreciate Tory.

You'll enjoy a period charmer with Mark Twain as detective and his young Yalie secretary Cabot as chronicler in Peter J. Heck's **A Connecticut Yankee in Criminal Court** (Berkley, \$21), the second in this series. Twain and Cabot dock in New Orleans on a speaking tour, and soon Twain has vowed to free a black cook accused of poisoning his master, a wealthy man who was running for governor. Against the background of this famous city with its colorful mix of ethnic characters, cultures, food, music, and religion, the famous author and his loyal sidekick worm their way into the heart of a scandalous murder. A perfect mix of history, mystery, and wit make this irresistible.

Diane Mott Davidson continues her sleuthing-caterer series with **The Main Corpse** (Bantam, \$21.95). Goldy's best friend Marla (with whom she shares the title "ex-wife of The Jerk") is trying to help out when she suggests to her business partner and lover that his firm use Goldy's culinary talents at their big investors' party. On the menu here are a likeable narrator, a dollop of domestic subplots, and a hearty main course of criminous activities spiced with some Colorado dreamin' of gold mines and fantastic wealth—all served up with delectable recipes.

Rosemary Edghill continues her Bast series with **The Bowl of**

**Night** (Forge, \$20.95). Bast was born Karen Hightower, a single Manhattan freelance graphic artist; "Bast" is the name she took when she became a witch ten years ago. Level-headed, redblooded, and definitely not a saint, Bast is nevertheless a very spiritual creature who has found her peace in paganism. In this third mystery, nonpagan readers are treated to an insiders' look at Hallowfest, the annual religious celebration held outdoors in upstate New York, sort of a witches' Woodstock. And as peaceful as the bucolic surroundings are, one doesn't have to be as clever as Bast to sense the tensions in this large group: Klingons and a survivalist ex-husband of one of Bast's friends are but two of the potential peace-disturbing problems. But the witch-hunt begins in earnest when Bast stumbles over the corpse of a longtime Fundamentalist critic of the festival. Bast's voice is genuinely engaging, her perspective is bracing, and the aura of magic adds a decidedly fresh note to this murder mystery.

John Wessel's first book, **This Far, No Further** (Simon & Schuster, \$23) introduces a new first-person private eye, Harding, haunted by a past case that robbed him of his license and put him in prison for manslaughter. Now he makes an off-the-books living, and his attorney-client assures him that the job is simple: take a few pictures of a doctor cheating on his wife, and the lawyer will have a stronger negotiating position in divorce court. But things happen quickly, and none of them looks good for Harding. Set against a gloomy, overcast Chicago, Wessel's voice drives the narrative of a plot that has a few surprising twists.

Fred Vickery may be seventy-three and have a dicky heart, but that isn't going to stop him when the chips are down. And when a member of his family is the prime suspect in a murder in his small Colorado town, Fred is going to hike up his trousers, ignore the sheriff's warnings to keep out of the investigation, and turn a deaf ear to his daughter's nagging about his health. His beloved wife Phoebe (rest her soul) would have agreed with him: Fred just has to butt into the sheriff's business to make sure that justice is done. Such is the setup in Sherry Lewis's **No Place for Death** (Berkley, \$5.99), and it's as tart and refreshing as a tall glass of lemonade on a scorcher of a day.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mystery was won by Jeff Rensch. Honorable mentions go to Arbor, Michigan; Lore-Heights, Kentucky; Island, Nebraska; Lou North Carolina; Joseph North Carolina; Craig A. Doucette of East Hartford, Connecticut; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; Phyllis Plant of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Anne Harvey Waugh of Webster, New York.



ous Photograph contest of Palo Alto, California, to Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lore-Heights, Kentucky; Island, Nebraska; Lou North Carolina; Joseph North Carolina; Craig A. Doucette of East Hartford, Connecticut; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; Phyllis Plant of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Anne Harvey Waugh of Webster, New York.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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## ROCK SONG by Jeff Rensch

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Man, they stand on top of me and sing that "rock song" and never think hey, just who is this song *about*, anyway? "I am a rock—I am an i-i-i-i-island." I mean, that song is me it was always me and okay, it's about my family, too. It's about all of us and how we just hate to be disturbed, man, which is true. This place is just for *us*, man. Admit it, we've never invited you here. As for all the kids who come here to be "alone," they make me laugh. Look around you, do you see "alone"? Some of them peel their clothes and swim here, the ones who know how, and we have to watch, we have no choice, because we can move but it takes a long time. Unless we're upset. And you sure haven't upset me yet.

That killer now, he upset me. Got blood all over me, then stood there looking over the water and singing that song. You know how creeps are when they think they're alone. He talked to himself. "I did it, and there's nobody here to know—nobody here!" And all my family standing around me, wondering what I was going to do about him. Was I just going to take his abuse?

Hey hey, lost your footing there a bit, didn't you? Just relax. I'm still not upset yet.

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AH February '97

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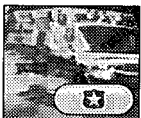
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*The SOS Phone offers a 24-hour call center to connect you with your emergency roadside service, 911 service or family members in the event of an emergency.*



**The SOS Phone gives you instant access to the emergency service you need, from towing to 911, even a family member or friend.**



Last month, I inquired about cellular phone service. I was surprised to find out how expensive it was, even for the most basic calling plans! I just couldn't justify spending that much for something I only wanted for an emergency. Then a friend told me about a product that would solve my problem. It's the SOS Phone—a cellular phone service designed exclusively for emergency use!

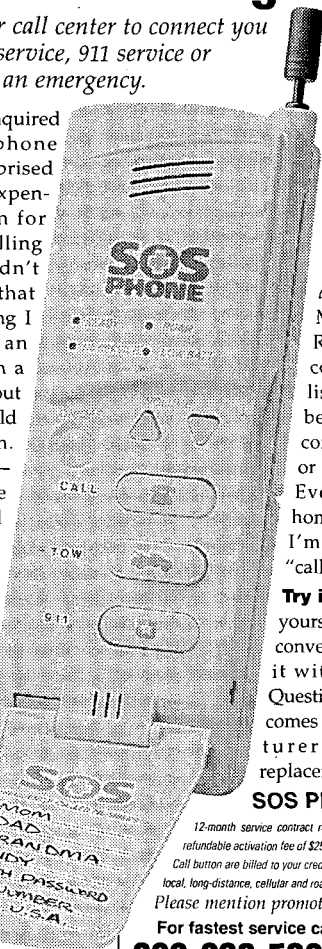
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**do?** With the touch of a button, the SOS Phone connects me to the roadside emergency service of my choice, a 911 service or a trained SOS operator, 24 hours a day. If I need help, I know it's just a phone call away.

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**Personalized service.** Each SOS Phone has a serial number that is recorded at the Call Center. Each time I use my phone, the operators will know it's me calling, and will greet me by name. My SOS Emergency Record will appear on the computer screen with my list of 10 most-used numbers and the operator will connect me with the person or emergency service I need. Even if I just want to call home to tell my husband that I'm running late, with the "call" button, I can!

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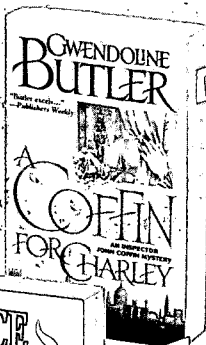
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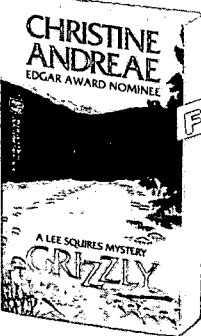
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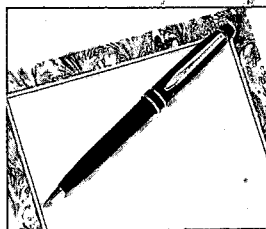
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